



**UNITED NATIONS
SERBIA**



UN Country Team in Serbia

**COMMON COUNTRY
ANALYSIS UPDATE
2023**

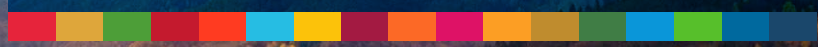


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FOREWORD

by the UN Resident Coordinator & Country Context

It was going to be a year of growth and transition. It turned into a year of political convulsions, protracted street demonstrations, and a pause in the reform process – except for the notable adoption of two important media laws and the law on management of state-owned enterprises. The Serbian economy generally stayed on a positive course despite inflationary trends, thanks in part to the Euro 2.4 billion loan signed with IMF in December 2022. Sustained foreign investments (reaching up to Euro 44 billion by the end of the year) indicate trust in Serbia's stability and business opportunities. Inequalities persisted regardless of the gradual reduction in poverty rates, incremental augmentation of the medium salary and the introduction of new social subsidies.

During the spring and summer, Serbia experienced again severe weather events, including floods, storms, and heatwaves, that caused fatalities, property damages, and significant losses to agricultural producers – while air pollution spiked towards the end of autumn. Climate change, loss of bio-diversity, and pollution, are a reality that is increasingly present in the life of citizens. The legislative framework for implementing a comprehensive green agenda further expanded in 2023, along with structural reforms in the energy sector and the beginning of rationalization of the state-owned EPS. A small but growing share of business investments are now linked to, and shaped by, sustainable practices. The digital transformation of the economy and of society continued as one of Serbia's most successful endeavours. Notwithstanding little progress on the accession path to the EU, Serbia re-committed to several key international initiatives, firming up its engagement to the SDGs along six core transitions and signing on key declarations at COP28 on sustainable food systems, the global renewable and energy efficiency pledge and the global cooling pledge.

The country fulfilled its normative obligations to international human rights mechanisms and treaties, preparing for the 4th UPR cycle and maintaining its platform of low intensity engagement for social dialogue between the government and civil society. It marked the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human rights by ratifying the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The government also adopted the National Youth Strategy and the Strategy for Active and Healthy Aging, two important frameworks that can help reduce discrimination and inequalities.

The dramatic school shooting in Belgrade in May 2023, immediately followed by another mass shooting in a suburb of the capital, and by violent clashes in the northern region of Kosovo*, triggered large demonstrations by citizens in Belgrade and in other cities across the country. While the initial focus was a grassroots demand to shift the societal paradigm away from violent models, the marked absence of dialogue between parties

and suspicions of irregularities in the latest local and general elections in December 2023 contributed to further eroding the trust among citizens towards state actors, and deepening the polarisation of the country.

The facilitated dialogue on the normalisation of relations with Pristina continued, culminating in February with the Brussels Agreement on the Path to Normalisation and later in March with the Implementation Annex in Ohrid, North Macedonia. Implementation, however, was marred by persistent delays and disagreement related to both the interpretation and the sequencing of the respective commitments, including under previously concluded agreements. Northern Kosovo continued to be the scene of inter-ethnic tension, and violent confrontations. The announcement of snap elections scheduled in December 2023 has further forestalled the EU's Belgrade-Pristina mediation efforts toward the end of the year. Political discourse was also heavily affected by the ongoing war in Ukraine, with public demands periodically issued by European Union (EU) officials that Serbia fully aligns with the EU common foreign policy in levying sanctions against Russia. While Serbia has denounced Russian military action and expressed its support for the full territorial integrity of Ukraine, it has also strived to maintain functional political and economic relations with the Russian Federation, whilst proclaiming neutrality in the East West tensions dominating the overall European security space.

In this complex geo-political environment, the UN in Serbia accelerated its own pace of action on the three strategic priorities agreed with the government of Serbia agreed in the UNSDCF: the green transformation, building on human capital, and strengthening the Rule of Law and Human Rights agenda, resulting in an overall delivery of €85 million as of September 2023, mainly driven by increased emphasis on the green agenda.

METHODOLOGY

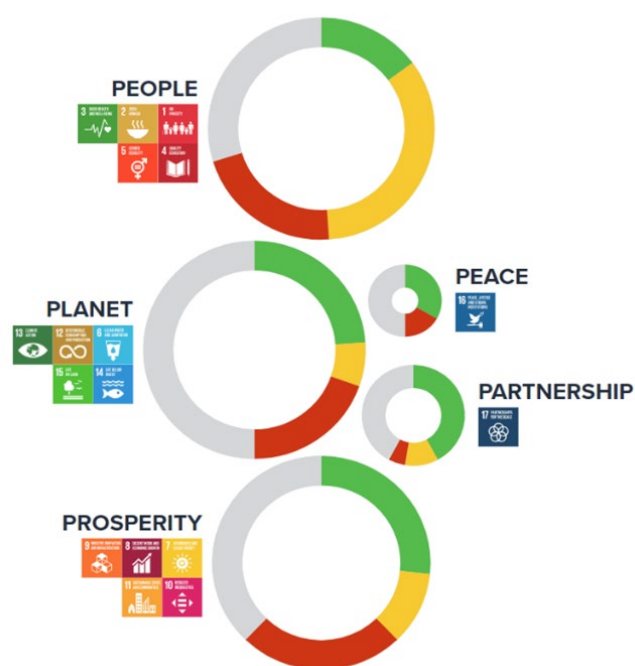
The information presented in the Common Country Analysis (CCA) is organized according to the three strategic priorities of the UN work in Serbia. It has been derived from two major sources. The first is a **desktop review**, which included: analytical work carried out by the UNCT during the year to date, in cooperation with the Government of the Republic of Serbia; data drawn from the 2022 Census and released from the National Office of Statistics and other official sources in the public domain; reports of international financial institution and international organizations as well as of the EU Serbia 2022 Report. The second is a round of **consultations** with all UNCT agencies, carried out in October 2023 to inform an early draft of this document, which also underwent successive rounds of comments from the same agencies. Finally, additional information was gathered from ongoing main UN processes, including discussions of results in thematic groups and in monthly UNCT meetings.

Image source: Freebik



1 PROGRESS ON AGENDA 2030

During the SDG Summit 2023, Serbia was among the 32 countries that recommitted to realizing the 2030 Agenda, by putting forward voluntary commitments structured around six pivotal transitions, as follows: 1) A just energy transition; 2) The transformation of the education system; 3) Enhancements in social protection and job opportunities; 4) Establishment of sustainable food systems; 5) Digital transformation; and 6) Addressing the triple planetary crisis, which encompasses climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. Serbia also reaffirmed its intention to develop a national development plan taking into consideration the principles of the 2030 Agenda.¹



Source: [UNDP Insight Report 2023](#)

Serbia's development priorities are closely aligned with the strategic goal of **EU membership**, building on the strong synergies between the two processes. The Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) between Serbia and the EU has been in progress since September 2013. To date, 22 out of 35 chapters have been opened, including all chapters in Cluster 1 on the fundamentals and all chapters in Cluster 4 on the "Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity." Since 2021, Serbia has accepted the Europe Union's revised enlargement methodology.²

To further the implementation of the SDGs, in 2015 Serbia established the Inter-Ministerial Working Group (IMWG) for the Implementation of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, comprised of representatives from line ministries and other institutions. Following the elections of June 2020, and more recently those of April 2022, the IMWG has not been re-established. Currently the responsibility for achieving the

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda is entrusted to the Ministry of European Integration (MEI), and a new coordination mechanism is being designed. Enhanced capacity for working across silos and pulling together different stakeholders is now essential, including for following up on Serbia's commitments in key multilateral frameworks, including the SDG Summit 2023 mentioned above and the outcomes of 2022 UN Biodiversity Conference (COP15), 2023 UN Climate Change Conference (COP28), and the Transforming Education Summit.

While many challenges remain, Serbia is making progress towards the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in several key areas, as evidenced by the graph above, which is organized according to the 5 Ps of sustainable development (People, Peace, Planet, Prosperity and Partnership).³ This reveals that, in total, about 25%⁴ of the SDGs are achieved or on track to be achieved in Serbia,⁵ against 18% at the global level.⁶ The [Progress report on the implementation of SDGs by 2030](#), published by the Statistical Office in April 2023, presents a comprehensive picture of both the achievements and the setbacks in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. For example, it shows progress as the **at-risk-of-poverty rate fell** in both the long term (2013–2021) and in the short term (2017–2021), and regress as the **proportion of students aged 15 years not achieving the minimum fixed level on the PISA scale increased**. The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) has most recently assigned Serbia a score of 77.3, which measures the total progress towards achieving all 17 SDGs.⁷

The **statistical capacity of the country** to monitor progress towards the Global Goals is relatively well developed, although substantial gaps remain as for more than 40% of indicators data is not available or is not of sufficient quality to assess progress against the Global Goals. Progress in data collection and availability has been visible in the increased number of regular surveys, the alignment of national statistics with European best practices, and the active collaboration with Eurostat, the United Nations Country Team (UNCT) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE). Recently, focused efforts on enhancing monitoring and reporting on the **2030 Agenda** has resulted in 12 new indicators being added to the national database, including two related to urban development.⁸

Additionally, Serbia is making progress in the localization of the 2030 Agenda, by initiating the Voluntary Local Review (VLR) in the city of Niš,⁹ and advancing policy reforms and building capacities in Local Self-Government (for more details, please refer to para 1.2.7), among other efforts.

¹ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Sustainable Development 2023.

² Additionally, two Chapters, on "Science and Research" and "Education and Culture" have been provisionally closed. For more information, please refer to: EU Delegation to the Republic of Serbia 2023.

³ UNDP 2022d.

⁴ Authors calculations

⁵ See <https://dashboards.sdginde.org/> Page 24, Figure 2.2

⁶ According to global SDG targets.

⁷ The SDSN notes a slight regress from 2021 to 2022, especially as regards SDG 15 Life on Land.

⁸ UN Habitat and UNRCO In the republic of Serbia, 2023.

⁹ The VLR of the city of Niš will be based on a review of 33 SDG indicators monitored at local level.

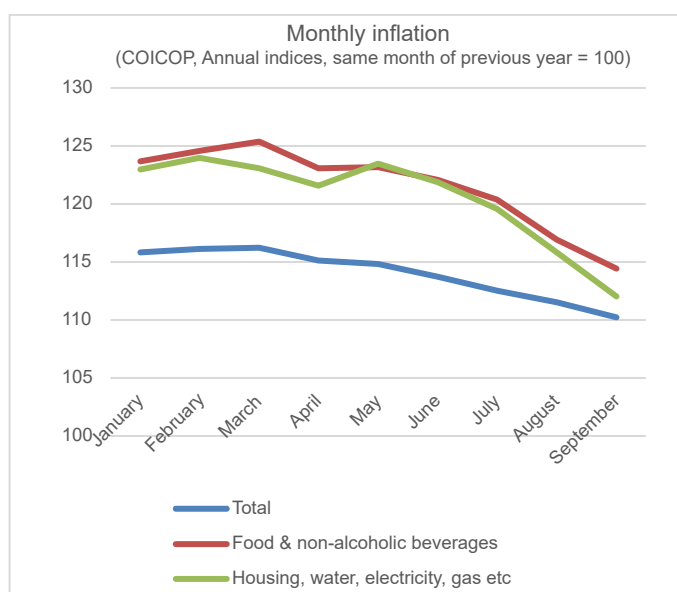


2 ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION, ENVIRONMENT & CLIMATE CHANGE

The economic outlook at the end of 2023 is overall a positive one. In the 3rd quarter of 2023, it was estimated that Gross Domestic Product (GDP) had increased 3.5% year on year, and registered employment by 2.2% over the same period. These trends were bolstered by good fiscal policy results, high foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows, and the relative stability of the exchange rate. Serbia is also making steady, if slow, progress in addressing challenges regarding the environment, climate change, and the related SDGs (SDG 6, 12, 13, 14, 15), with many infrastructure projects close to completion that are expected to deliver tangible improvements in the quality of life of citizens in the coming months.

EVOLUTION OF ECONOMIC FUNDAMENTALS IN THE YEAR TO DATE

A key tenet of the economic performance of Serbia in the year to date was the conclusion of a **Stand-By Arrangement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF)** for nearly €2½ billion USD in December 2022.¹⁰ This extraordinary step was taken after Serbia was confronted with weakening global demand, major supply chain disruptions, and material shortages in global markets and had to simultaneously cover the losses incurred by two key State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs). One year into the Agreement, its implementation is on track, as confirmed by the IMF at the end of October, with all targets met, or expected to be met, according to schedule and the structural reform agenda in the energy sector also advancing at pace.¹¹ A major development in 2023 was the Free Trade Agreement with China, signed in October 2023 and ratified by the Serbian Parliament in December 2023¹². The agreement will allow up to 80% of trade between the two countries to be duty-free, after a gradual phase down.



In early 2023, growth was subdued¹³ largely due to unfavourable prospects in regional and global markets, and the cost-of-living crisis, which impacted real incomes and consumption trends. Driven by food and energy prices, **inflation** in Serbia was not only the highest in the Western Balkans and the second highest in Europe, but also peaked later than in other countries of the region, at 16.2% year on year in March 2023.

¹⁰ So far, Serbia has used 180 million euros from this arrangement, and no further withdrawals are planned. A proposal to make the arrangement a precautionary one is being evaluated.

¹¹ International Monetary Fund 2023a.

¹² Government of Serbia, [Agreement on Free Trade](#) between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the People's Republic of China, October 2023.

¹³ GDP growth slowed to 0.9% year on year in Q1 2023. See Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2023l.

With prices still stubbornly high despite significant hikes in the primary interest rate,¹⁴ a better understanding of the dynamics behind inflation is critical to effectively calibrate future corrective measures.¹⁵ Such measures will be particularly important in protecting those left furthest behind from the erosion of their purchasing power,¹⁶ as presented in greater detail in the paragraph on Poverty in Chapter 2 of this report.

FDI performed strongly again in 2023. In the first nine months of the year, the total FDI inflow to Serbia exceeded EUR 3.2 bn, up by 8% year on year, continuing the upward trend of the last several years, briefly interrupted by the pandemic in 2020.¹⁷ FDI inflows were also well diversified by region of origin, with a growing share of Asia Pacific countries, alongside the European Union. **Fiscal developments** in Q1-Q3 were also better than expected.

By October 2023, the central government budget deficit had been reduced to 0.2% of GDP, continuing the downward trend of 2021 and 2022, from the record high of 8.8% during the COVID-19 pandemic. Central government public debt also fell substantially and was 51.5% of GDP in November 2023.¹⁸ Even as the debt stock is lower, higher interest rates are inflating the interest payments component in the national budget and **compressing the share available to social and environmental priorities**. At the same time, the large role of the state in the economy,¹⁹ coupled with the narrow depth of the Serbian financial markets,²⁰ has long been a cause of concern, particularly at a time when financing the green transition requires fresh investments. To address these entrenched challenges a new [project](#) aimed at supporting the development of the Serbian capital market was started in March with World Bank support, and a Government-supported issuance of corporate bonds is planned for January 2024.

Labour market dynamics

The **employment gains** of the last three years were maintained in 2023.²¹ At the same time, for specialized professions,

¹⁴ Serbian primary interest rate was [progressively increased](#) from 1.5% in April 2022 to 6.5% in July 2023, and has remained unchanged since.

¹⁵ According to the World Bank in 2021 and in the first half of 2022 in Western Balkan countries, and throughout most of the world, firms were able to increase profit margins in many sectors characterized by a mismatch between high demand - due to the pandemic fiscal programmes - and simultaneous supply constraints. Supply and demand patterns then normalized, leading to lower inflationary pressures, but the indexation of wages, became then a key inflation driver, explaining prices stickiness. See: World Bank 2023e.

¹⁶ Monthly retail spending statistics offer a close proxy of the tightening of household expenditures on necessities, and in real term retail spending fell for several successive months through 2023. For example, in March 2023, retail spending contracted by 9% against the level of the previous year. See: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2023j.

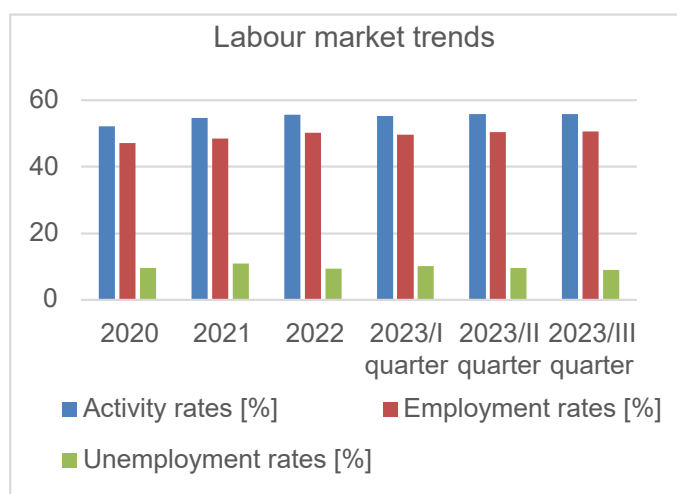
¹⁷ National Bank of the Republic of Serbia 2023. For comparison, it was 55.1% at the end of 2022.

¹⁸ [Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Serbia 2023b](#).

¹⁹ In the third quarter of 2023, the percentage of employees in the public sector accounted for 25.8% of total registered employment. See: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2023c. By comparison, government employment [averaged](#) 16% in the EU.

²⁰ The Belex 15 turnover taken as a loose proxy of the capitalisation of the Belgrade stock market, has not yet bounced back to its pre-financial crisis level and has further contracted in 2022.

²¹ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2023b. According to the data the main indicators show that there were negligible changes in the labour market in the third quarter of 2023 as compared to the third quarter of the previous year.



workforce shortages were among the top concerns raised by businesses in Serbia, as was also the case in the rest of the Western Balkans, with over 60% of businesses requesting that authorities deploy policies to retain workers,²² which also led the government to take further steps to liberalize the work permit regime.²³

Average net salaries, however, barely kept up with inflation and increased by only 1% year on year in real terms during the first nine months of the year against the same period in the year before. The large gap between median and average (mean) wages continued to widen, particularly in real terms, in a concerning sign of persistent inequality.²⁴ On average, salaries are about 55% of the EU average,²⁵ mirroring low labour productivity²⁶ and structural challenges in the labour market. These include, among other issues, low labour force participation, particularly among women (see paragraph below) and marginalized groups, high unemployment rates among the youth, and high levels of informality.²⁷ With unemployment rates among young people remaining high, the trend of young and skilled people emigrating has continued, mainly to the European Union and Switzerland.

The adoption of the new [Law on Safety and Health at Work](#) in April 2023, tightened employers' responsibility for accidents resulting from the non-implementation of relevant codes. However, its implementation will require further resources as there is a persistent shortage in labour inspectors.²⁸ Finally, as the

²² Regional Cooperation Council 2023 and World Bank 2023a.

²³ The Serbian Parliament adopted amendments to [Law on Foreigners](#) and the [Law on the Employment of Foreigners](#) in July 2023 to shorten procedures for entering the job market, by introducing a "Single Permit", which covers both the work and the residence permit.

²⁴ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2023a and Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2023i.

²⁵ Author's calculation using official data from the Statistical Office of Serbia and a weighted average for the EU.

²⁶ A firm located in Serbia needs three times as many workers per unit of output as one in the EU. See: World Bank 2019.

²⁷ The [Program for Suppression of the Gray Economy until 2025](#) with an Action plan for 2023-24 was adopted in June 2023.

²⁸ According to [an interview](#) with the president of the professional organization Network of Inspectors of Serbia, about 2,200 inspectors currently work in the republic's inspections, and another 1,600 are engaged in local self-government units, while the analysis of the Ministry of State Administration and Local Self-Government from 2019 showed that at least 3,600 are needed at the Republic level alone.

green transformation gathers pace, **active labour market policies (ALMPs)** become even more important and should receive additional funding to support the integration of hard to employ groups in the labour market and overcome skills mismatches.

Economic Policy Responses in 2023

Over the course of 2023, the Government adopted several measures aimed at mitigating the impact of the unfavourable international environment on the economy and population, as well as of the successive floods and heavy storms of the 2023 summer season. It also intervened to gradually address the structural problems of the energy sector, which undermined Serbia's economic performance in late 2022.

Interventions included: public investments, supported by international donors; the progressive alignment of domestic energy prices with international ones; and the organization of public auctions, expected at term to double the current Serbian green energy capacity. These measures are broadly in line with UN agendas and the objectives of the UN Cooperation Framework 2021-2025. At the same time, the Government has in recent months once again adopted ad hoc fiscal policy changes, including:

- A payment of RSD 10,000 for each child under the age of 16 (September 2023);²⁹
- An extraordinary salary increase of 5.5% for public sector employees in education and health care (September 2023);³⁰
- An extraordinary pension increase of 5.5% (October 2023);³¹
- Financial aid in the amount of 20,000 dinars to beneficiaries of pensions (old-age, early-age, disability and family pensioners) (November 2023);³²
- One-time financial assistance in the amount of RSD 10,000 to Serbian citizens that are students of secondary schools, both public and private (November 2023).³³

While targeted and specific measures in favour of the most vulnerable are essential to counter the cost of living crisis, it is important that the government adopt a more comprehensive approach in the future aimed at sustainably increasing expenditures for social protection at least to the level of the average in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and consistent with the principle of Leave No One Behind (LNOB).³⁴

Women economic empowerment

If no significant change is made, **it will take another 58 years to achieve full gender equality in the labour market in Serbia.**³⁵ The magnitude of the gender gap in labour participation is

²⁹ Fiscal Council 2023a and 2023b.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Fund for Pension and Disability Insurance of the Republic of Serbia 2023.

³³ Government of the Republic of Serbia 2023g.

³⁴ OHCHR, UN Country Team Serbia, and Government of the Republic of Serbia 2022.

³⁵ This conclusion is based on the Gender Equality Index, which details how many years it will take to achieve full gender parity in 6 areas at current pace of progress. For details please see: UN Women 2023a and UN Women 2021.

persistent in the Serbian labour market, where women have a much lower labour force participation rate (51% vs. 66% for the working age population in 2022)³⁶. Additionally, women comprise only 31.2% of all entrepreneurs.³⁷

Many indicators confirm the above assessment, based on the disadvantaged position of women in the labour market, such as the concentration of women in low productivity sectors and in the care economy. Discrimination is also evident in the realm of recruitment, promotion, pay and benefits, and the availability of training opportunities, as well as in relation to maternity and parental leave. Finally, women spend on average a bit more than four hours (4:09) in unpaid work activities per day, against two hours (2:03) for men, or more than double the time, pointing to the need for further sensitization and awareness raising.³⁸

Expo 2027

Serbia was elected as the host country of the Specialised Expo 2027/2028 by the Member States of the Bureau International des Expositions (BIE) in June 2023. The major event - expected to draw over 3 million visitors - is scheduled to be held in Belgrade from May 15 to August 15, 2027. The unifying theme of the Expo will be "**Play for Humanity: Sport and Music for All**," aiming to celebrate global recovery through different mediums and to offer a platform for cultural exchange.³⁹

In preparation, the Government has announced a series of signature infrastructure projects estimated at a total cost of €12 billion. These will include: the completion of a new National Stadium with a capacity for 52,000 people; the construction of 18 km of railroad leading from the city centre to the airport and the Stadium site; and the initiation of the "Sail Serbia" project. While an assessment of the impact of the Expo on environmental stewardship and social cohesion are currently hard to gauge, direct and indirect economic effects have been projected at 1.1 billion euros, while the Expo is also expected to boost Serbia's capacity to host additional large-scale events in future.⁴⁰ Expo will be a key test of Serbia's capacity to use its legislative framework - including on green procurement⁴¹ - to promote the green and circular agenda, decent work and energy efficiency while drastically reducing pollution and leaving no one behind.

ICT contribution to sustainable development

Serbia has made **significant progress in the ICT sector**. According to the Online Services Sub-index, Serbia outpaces the world, sub-regional, and regional averages, while having the highest growth potential in the Telecommunication Infrastructure Sub-index.⁴²

In 2022, total expenditures for R&D grew by 10% from the previous year,⁴³ nearly 1% of GDP (against 2.2% in the EU in 2021). 83.5% of individuals used the Internet in 2022, a notable increase from 33.5% ten years earlier, while almost the entire Serbian population (95.5%) owns a mobile phone.⁴⁴ Still, Internet access remains expensive for low wage earners: the average fixed-broadband basket is estimated at 2.31% of Gross National Income (GNI) per capita (compared to an average of 1.2% in Europe).⁴⁵ In addition to reducing social and economic inequalities, decreasing the price of Internet usage is of key importance to foster economic competitiveness and unlock new opportunities, especially for small and medium enterprises (SMEs). In the domain of E-Government, Serbia is **trailblazing the digital transformation** and is currently ranked 40th in the UN E-Government Development Index⁴⁶, while **there is a well-recognized need for E-Government services to be more user-centric⁴⁷ and better informed by human rights principles⁴⁸**.

While **women are generally equal to men in terms of meaningful access to the Internet** (e.g., uploading content online), the difference in advanced skills is more prominent, with men overall more capable of installing software, changing software settings, and writing code.⁴⁹ The Serbian ICT field is heavily male-dominated: while gender equality in technology ecosystems is in line with global averages and, in some areas, higher than in the EU, the participation of women should be promoted more. Women and girls should be encouraged to study ICT subjects and learn coding at a young age (only 28% of ICT students and 14.2% of programmers are women).⁵⁰

Serbia also continues to show a commitment to the development of science, technology, and innovation **as a tool for furthering sustainable development**. For example:

- Serbia was the first country that successfully adopted the **Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI) for SDGs Roadmap in 2022**, successfully embedding the Global Goals in its Smart Specialisation Strategy;⁵¹
- At the 2023 High-Level Political Forum, Serbia showcased the **SDG Investor Map**, identifying sectors with the greatest opportunities for sustainable investment;
- Serbia launched the Initiative for the **International Decade of Science for Sustainability** in August 2023, which will be implemented from 2024 until 2033.⁵²

Finally, ICTs have also been mobilized in supporting **Serbian start-ups**, including through the [expansion Serbia's science and technology parks](#) - which will offer co-working spaces,

³⁶ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2023m.

³⁷ Up from 28.1% ten years earlier. See UN Women 2023b.

³⁸ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2023d.

³⁹ [EXPO 2027 Belgrade, Serbia](#).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ From January 1st 2024, public procurement decisions will need to consider a set of environmental aspects (e.g. product lifespan, maintenance costs, water and electricity and recycling). See NALED 2023.

⁴² UNECE and ITU recently completed a scoping study on digital transformation priorities and technical assistance needs of the programme countries in the UNECE region.

⁴³ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2022e.

⁴⁴ ITU 2023a.

⁴⁵ ITU 2023a.

⁴⁶ Serbia moved up by [18 ranks since 2020](#).

⁴⁷ The [EU eGovernment Benchmark 2023](#) places Serbia in the lowest decile (below EU average) among EU Member States and selected accession countries.

⁴⁸ Safeguards and human rights protection are not sufficiently integrated into the process of digitalization, and there are important concerns as regards the state bodies access to citizens' personal data in the digital world. See: UNDP 2023.

⁴⁹ UN Women 2021 and ITU 2021.

⁵⁰ ITU 2021.

⁵¹ European Commission's Joint Research Center, Serbian Smart Specialization Team 2022.

⁵² Government of the Republic of Serbia 2023d.

offices, and services to support the growth of nascent and innovative businesses - and Smart Manufacturing Centres - which are expected to serve as central hubs of competence for Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies.

Agricultural and food industry

In 2022, **agriculture, forestry, and fishing accounted for 6.5% of gross value added**,⁵³ representing Serbia's fourth largest sector. Employment in the sector is also high, at 15%.⁵⁴ Serbia is a net food exporter, with food and agriculture contributing 13.2% of total exports,⁵⁵ particularly towards the EU and countries of the Central European Free Trade Agreement. Increasing ICT penetration and enhancing the adoption of advanced technologies in Serbian agriculture are key to developing the sector and fostering productivity growth. Currently, only 14% of farmers report adopting smart farming technologies, while 81% report that the high cost of farming equipment is the primary reason for not adopting smart technologies. A significant majority (94%) stated that they would adopt such technologies if subsidies were made available ([ITU and Food and Agriculture Organization](#)). Still, the sector remains highly vulnerable to disasters, as evidenced again this year. In this regard, the reform of the agricultural insurance system is one of the factors that could reduce the impact of disasters to livelihoods.

The three most important policy developments in the year to date in this sector were:

- The opening of the registrations on the [E-Agrar platform](#) in March 2023, which established an online Registry of Agricultural Holdings and made the processing of subsidy requests submitted by the holdings more efficient. It is estimated that nearly all agricultural holdings are now registered, although difficulty in accessing and using the registry was reported for a part of the public.
- The adoption of the [Amendments to the Law on Incentives in Agriculture and Rural Development](#) in October 2023, which increased the maximum area of cultivated agricultural land for which the right to basic and production-related incentives for plant production can be exercised from 20 to 100 hectares, and which also introduced changes in subsidies and incentives.
- The introduction of the subject of **Climate Change in agricultural schools as an elective subject**.

Serbia will have to develop a **new Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development** as the current one expires in 2024. This represents an excellent opportunity to address key developmental challenges, such as competitiveness, environmental sustainability and land degradation, circularity with linkage to food loss, decarbonization, the underdevelopment of rural areas, and gender equality.

The progressive alignment of the Strategy with the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the integration of the principles of

the [EU Green Deal, Farm to Fork, and Biodiversity strategies](#) will be key to making the agricultural sector more environmentally and socially sustainable. Other outstanding reforms include the development of a Code of Good Agricultural Practices and the implementation of a requirement that beneficiaries of direct payments comply with Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions. The adoption of a **food systems perspective**, as reflected in [Serbia's National Pathway](#), made incremental progress also through the participation in the UN Food Systems Summit Stocktaking Moment, held in Rome in July 2023.

The urban agenda

According to the 2022 census, Serbia's urbanization rate stands at approximately 62%, up from 22.5% in 1953⁵⁶. The key hubs – aside from the capital Belgrade - with almost 1.7 million inhabitants - are Novi Sad, with over 360,000 inhabitants, Niš, with almost 250,000, and Kragujevac, with around 170,000. Following the adoption of the [Sustainable Urban Development Strategy](#) in 2019, and of the related [Action Plan](#) in March 2021, challenges remain in the implementation of a truly integrated, gender-responsive, and sustainable approach to urban development.

In the year to date, the most important policy developments were the Adoption of the [Amendments to the Law on Planning and Construction](#) in July 2023, which introduced numerous changes aimed at expediting and facilitating investments in real estate. These include: the abolition of the fee for the conversion of land use rights into ownership rights; the establishment of the Agency for Spatial Planning and Urbanism, tasked with the implementation and improvement of spatial planning and development policies and new rules on energy performance certificates of buildings. This was followed in August by a [Regulation](#) allowing the temporary connection of illegally built buildings to electricity, water, sewerage, gas, and/or the district heating network. In September 2023, the Institute for Architecture and Urban and Spatial Planning developed a Roadmap for Implementing Urban Safety Measures in the Urban Planning Process, pending government adoption.

Serbia also continues to progress the implementation of the [UN New Urban Agenda \(2016\)](#) and the **localization of the 2030 Agenda**. Multiple efforts are underway, including through:

- The development of green, inclusive and resilient sustainable mobility infrastructures in 145 Serbian Local Self-Governments (LSGs) with support from Agence Française de Développement (AFD), the World Bank, and the Serbian Ministry of Construction, Transport, and Infrastructure (project has kickstarted).
- The development of the Voluntary Local Review of the city of Niš and the Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan in the city of Kragujevac (both in progress).
- Innovative approaches to confront the challenge of shrinking public spaces (e.g. the cities of Niš and Kruševac proposals to the World Urban Forum 12 (WUF12)).

⁵³ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2023h. In the EU the share it is around 1.5%.

⁵⁴ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2023e.

⁵⁵ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2023f.

⁵⁶ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2022c.

Sustainable management of natural and cultural resources

In managing its rich tangible, intangible, movable, and unmovable cultural heritage, Serbia is increasingly promoting its links with the priorities of sustainable development. A few examples:

Serbia piloted an enhanced **collection of data related to SDG indicators on culture** ([Culture 2030 indicators](#)) both at the national level, and in the city of Leskovac as the selected urban area, also informing the new strategic framework on culture for Leskovac. This experience could be replicated in other municipalities;

- A survey of quantitative and qualitative **obstacles to gender equality in the sector of culture, arts, and creative industries** was produced, in cooperation with local faculties and civil society. It will be followed by dedicated capacity-building activities informed by the results of the research;
- In support of SDG 8.9 **on sustainable tourism**, Serbia continues to promote **World Heritage Sites** and to work closely with Local Self Governments (e.g., Serbia became a member of the [Global Sustainable Tourism Council](#) in May 2023). Additionally, in 2023, **Čačak became the first cultural capital of Serbia**, as part of a project aimed at the decentralization of cultural life, and the promotion of equal cultural development and equal availability of cultural content throughout the country.⁵⁷
- Finally, the [Djerdap UNESCO Global Geopark](#) works to include local communities, volunteers and schools to enhance awareness and understanding of key issues such as using earth's resources sustainably, mitigating the effects of climate change and reducing natural hazard-related risks.

PRESERVING THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT AND FIGHTING THE TRIPLE PLANETARY CRISIS

Serbia is progressively integrating climate action and a green transition approach towards a low carbon economy in its policies and strategies, including through the implementation of the three Rio Conventions, of other multilateral environmental agreements, such as UNECE Conventions, and of its [National Determined Contribution](#),⁵⁸ submitted in August 2022. Also guided by the EU Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, in 2023 the country focused on multiple legislative upgrades and policy interventions for energy efficiency, decarbonization, the just transition, fighting water and air pollution, and protecting the environment. Key recent developments in these priority areas are briefly reviewed below.

⁵⁷ As the [first Serbian Capital of Culture](#), Cacak organized close to a hundred art, movie, theater, music, and literary events in 2023.

⁵⁸ Serbia committed to reduce its emissions by 13.2%, as compared to 2010 levels, by 2030.

Energy efficiency and decarbonization

The fundamental tenets of the energy regulatory system are now largely in place, albeit with delays. The [Low Carbon Development Strategy for 2023 to 2030](#) was approved in June 2023, laying out the methodology for achieving a reduction of Greenhouse Gases (GHG) emissions by 33.3% compared to 1990, also based on the [Law on Climate Change](#) (which had been adopted in 2021). Public consultations on the Integrated National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP) were concluded in the summer, and its adoption is now pending.

Bringing these frameworks to full implementation will be a formidable challenge. Serbia uses nearly four times as much energy as the EU average to produce one euro of GDP,⁵⁹ and its electricity demand per capita grew by almost 9% between 2020 and 2022 (against less than 1% in Europe). Here, the residential sector offers a significant potential for resource optimization: a large majority of Serbian families still use outdated devices to warm their homes,⁶⁰ and current housing stock is not sufficiently insulated.⁶¹ For this reason, several incentive programmes have been introduced to support the **retrofitting and rehabilitation of family houses** and apartments in the past three years, and about 20,000 households are estimated to have used the funds. In 2023, a new program on "[Clean Energy and Energy Efficiency](#)" was initiated which will allocate 1.8 RSD billions in subsidies in 131 local self-governments to help co-finance energy efficiency measures. While in previous programs, such subsidies covered only half of the costs of these installations, this percentage was brought up to 65% in the most recent one, alleviating the burden on poorer households. Additionally, a campaign for the **retrofitting of public buildings** is expected to result in annual reductions of up to 56% in their Carbon Dioxide (CO₂) emissions.

Serbia still depends on coal for over 65%⁶² of its energy needs and **decarbonizing the electricity sector** is paramount. Key steps forward were taken in the year to date, including: rationalizing the governance of the state-owned enterprises SOEs Elektroprivreda Srbije (EPS) and Srbijagas; designing a plan to gradually increase electricity tariffs to achieve cost recovery in the medium term; and re-establishing energy security with infrastructural investments, including in the distribution network, to reduce losses. These were all key parts of the reform programme agreed upon with the IMF and are now in the advanced phase of implementation. Additionally, to boost the use of alternative energies, the [amended Law on the Use of Renewable Energy Sources](#) was adopted in March, opening the way for the first **renewable energy auctions** in August 2023. These are expected to result in an increased capacity of 400 MW for wind power and 50 MW for solar and are part of a three-year plan envisaging the rollout of a total of 1,000 MW from wind and 300 MW from solar.

⁵⁹ Measured in kilograms of oil equivalent (KGOE) per thousand euros, Serbia's energy efficiency stood at 424.23 KGOE/1000 euros against an [EU average of 116.67](#).

⁶⁰ A high percentage of households – 48% in the general population and 88% in Roma settlements – still use outdated fuels and technologies for heating, cooking, and lighting. UNICEF 2020.

⁶¹ RES Foundation 2022 and Danas 2022a.

⁶² Ministry of Mining and Energy of the Republic of Serbia 2023.

The need for a Just Transition

In 2023, the focus has been more on securing new energy sources than on planning out the Just Transition. While there is broad awareness about the need to define a strategy for coal phase-out, a vision for this transition is yet to be articulated. The coal mining sector currently contributes about 0.6% of GDP⁶³ and 0.8% of total formal employment.⁶⁴

A United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) scenario analysis based on International Labour Organization (ILO) methodology carried out in 2020 shows that, overall, the economy-wide impact on employment of **coal phase-out** would be low, with overall positive effects and notably more jobs created than lost (job creation is estimated to range from 1.7% to 2.5%).⁶⁵ At the same time, mines and coal power plants are still key to rural economies, particularly of the Kolubara and Kostolac regions. It is then of key importance that a participatory and inclusive process of consultations be designed to flesh out the details of a programme focusing both on new employment opportunities for coal miners and the overall social and economic wealth of the affected communities.

Equally important is taking into consideration the specific needs of the **energy poor** when adapting energy and electricity prices, accounting for environmental and societal costs. In this regard, the support provided by the EU in 2022 and 2023 for the reduction of bills for electricity, thermal energy and gas for vulnerable families was particularly important.⁶⁶ Finally, in its design and implementation, the just transition should refer to the Gender Equality Strategy – which includes measures to reduce energy poverty – recognizing that the process will affect women in different ways than men.

The impact of poor air quality on citizens' health

In Serbia, as elsewhere in the Western Balkans region, **air pollution is the number one environmental threat to health**: approximately 15,000 deaths annually are directly attributable to exposure to polluted air.⁶⁷ It is estimated that more than 4 million people currently live in agglomerations where air is classified as Category III (excessively polluted),⁶⁸ a direct result of industrial emissions, including from thermal power plants⁶⁹, congested urban road traffic, frequent unsanitary landfill fires, and the

use of low-quality fuel and heating devices. The latter have the heaviest impact on human mortality and morbidity, specifically because they emit large quantities of PM2.5 particulate matter. The impact is particularly acute on children and youth.⁷⁰ The [Air Protection Programme 2022-2030](#), adopted in December 2022, must therefore be more consistently prioritized and implemented, including by improving punctuality and thoroughness in reporting.⁷¹

Measures aimed at improving air quality complement and overlap those aimed at energy efficiency and energy decarbonization reviewed above and include: decreased use of solid fuels for household heating and cooking, together with the replacement of inefficient devices⁷²; reduction of emissions from industrial sites and power plants; and the uptake of sustainable mobility.⁷³ Further areas for improvement include the implementation of strategies to eliminate the harmful occurrence of landfill fires, which have a devastating impact on air quality and human health.⁷⁴ The practice of burning agricultural waste – or stubble burning – is also a significant source of air pollution, but government efforts to raise the awareness of farmers towards discontinuing these practices have yielded only limited results.

Lastly, citizens' awareness should be enhanced through increased communication about the health risks of air pollution, which should be accompanied by the enhancement of public health professionals' capacity to use contemporary methods for health risk and impact assessment and environmental risk monitoring and to fill gaps in knowledge through better use of epidemiological and air pollution data.⁷⁵

Rewiring of the Serbian economy is still needed to achieve circularity

Serbia has been laying the foundations for a transition towards a more **circular economy**. The [Programme for the Development of the Circular Economy](#) for the period 2022-2024 was adopted in December 2022.⁷⁶ In 2023, work started on a roadmap for food loss and waste reduction and management, while the use of "challenge calls" to incentivize the adoption of circular solutions by SMEs and local self-governments has delivered good results⁷⁷, along with awareness raising initiatives by the Chamber of Commerce. A key priority area is enhancing

⁶³ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2023h.

⁶⁴ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2023n.

⁶⁵ UNDP 2020a. Please also see UNECE 2022 for guidance on the management of hazards related to coal mines closures and to the postmining stage.

⁶⁶ In 2023, more than 190,000 households, or three times as many as in 2022, were able to benefit from energy discounts, through an application to their local self-government, thanks to the [Energy Support Package of the European Union for Serbia](#) for 165 million Euro.

⁶⁷ European Environment Agency 2023.

⁶⁸ This total was calculated by the authors, based on the information contained in the Environmental Protection Agency's [Annual Report on the State of Air Quality in the Republic of Serbia for 2022](#), matched with [Census data on population by municipalities and cities](#).

⁶⁹ In October 2023, the Energy Community Secretariat initiated a [dispute settlement procedure](#) against Serbia for not closing the Morava coal-fired power plant, specifically mentioning widespread adverse health effects. The installation of desulphurization plants to limit sulphur dioxide emissions from the thermal power plants – particularly the "Nikola Tesla" and "Kostolac" – has been repeatedly postponed due to a series of procedural as well as technical irregularities in the completion of the project, as detailed in Renewables and Environmental Regulatory Institute (RERI) [Desulphurization in the Western Balkans](#) and CEE Bankwatch Network [Comply or Close 2023](#).

⁷⁰ UNICEF 2021.

⁷¹ There are concerns on the quality of the data due to some polluted areas lacking air quality stations or monitoring only a limited number of air quality parameters.

⁷² See the paragraph above on Energy efficiency, as the "[Clean energy & energy efficiency](#)" programme is also relevant to tackling air pollution.

⁷³ Of relevance to the specific challenges Serbia faces in reducing Air Pollution, the "Gothenburg Protocol" under the umbrella of the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution, together with related guidance materials, provide a range of abatement techniques and economic instruments for emission reduction in relevant sectors. While Serbia is a Party to the Air Convention, it has not yet ratified the Gothenburg Protocol.

⁷⁴ As shown in the UNEP publication "Wasted Air: Impact of Landfill Fires on Air Pollution and People's Health in Serbia" upcoming.

⁷⁵ For example, the Government and the UN cooperated in the organization of the 2023 awareness raising event on [Clean Air for Blue Skies](#) and in a campaign to stop the harmful practice of burning crop residues.

⁷⁶ UNDP 2020b and Government of the Republic of Serbia 2022d.

⁷⁷ See [examples of selected circular economy approaches](#) developed in 2023 by the private sector with UN support.

inter-ministerial cooperation, particularly to address loss and waste.

On the infrastructure side, **in 2023 the Vinca facility entered service**, which includes a new EU-compliant sanitary landfill, a waste-to-energy facility, and specific measures in support of informal waste pickers, to support their professional requalification. These reforms and investments are acutely needed as **waste generation** in Serbia has increased by over 50% in the last decade, approaching the average of waste per capita in EU countries, while the rate of municipal waste that is recycled continued to stagnate at around 2% of total waste generated by households, against 48% in the EU.⁷⁸ This low recycling rate is due, amongst other factors, to low awareness and resistance to change, insufficient municipal waste collection coverage (86.4%), landfilling as the only “treatment” of municipal waste, inadequate capacities for recyclable waste collection, low primary separation of organic waste, the disposal of waste at unsanitary landfills, and the lack of facilities for the treatment of hazardous waste and of construction and demolition waste.

Serbia is in the bottom half of European countries in terms of **electronic waste** (e-waste) generated per capita,⁷⁹ but only about 20% of E-waste is collected and recycled, though Serbia has adopted laws that closely mirror the EU Waste from Electrical and Electronic Equipment Directive (2012/19/EU), which sets collection, recycling, reuse, and recovery targets for e-waste, and Directive 2011/65/EU on the use of hazardous substances in Electrical and Electronic Equipment.⁸⁰

Sustainable management of water resources

An increasing proportion of the population is being connected to **wastewater treatment** thanks to new national and foreign projects aimed at the construction of municipal sewage infrastructure⁸¹. These long overdue investments will allow addressing both the persistent problem of contamination of drinking water⁸² and the pollution of watercourses from untreated wastewater.⁸³

International cooperation and **transboundary water management** are also important, as Serbia largely depends on water resources originating outside its territory (90% of the waters flowing through the country transit via the Danube, Sava, and Tisa rivers and other waterways). Serbia is a party to the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (“Water Convention”), and, according to 2020 data, 89.65% of its transboundary waters (river

and lake basins and aquifers) are covered by operational agreements or arrangements for water cooperation (SDG indicator 6.5.2). At the Carpathian Convention Conference of the Parties (COP), held in Belgrade in October 2023 (also see below), Serbia and Romania established of a **transboundary Ramsar site** in the Đerdap gorge (Iron Gate) National Park, along the Danube River.⁸⁴

Protecting biodiversity by establishing protected areas and improving forestry management

In its long-term commitment to protect **biological diversity**, Serbia has different types of protected areas in place, which currently amount to 8.62% of the national territory (against 18.5% in the EU),⁸⁵ as well as an ecological network. In line with its obligations under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), of which it has been a party since 2002, Serbia has submitted six successive National Reports, and established an [online database](#) to monitor progress in the implementation of its Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 and Aichi Biodiversity Targets.⁸⁶ It has additionally adopted the Nature Protection Programme for 2021–2023, aligned with the 2018 Law on the Planning System as well as with the UN Strategic Plan for the CBD 2011–2020.

The most recent significant pressures on biodiversity have largely stemmed from: fires in protected areas which have impacted forest ecosystems; agricultural production (overuse of artificial fertilizers and pesticides, uncontrolled drainage of liquid manure from cattle farms, land management in steppe and salty water habitats, and diffuse pollution on agricultural fields); the construction of hydroelectric power plants; and the intensive exploitation of sand and gravel from riverbeds.

Ecotourism has viable potential as confirmed by the evaluation of tourist attractions in selected protected areas (PAs), such as Stara Planina Nature Park and Suva Planina Special Nature Reserve. However, significant weaknesses need to be addressed in this context, such as underdeveloped infrastructure and depopulation. Illegal trade in wildlife is also a concern, with issues spanning from the illegal harvesting of terrestrial orchids of the Fruška Gora mountain for therapeutic usage, to the illegal poaching of sturgeons in the Danube for caviar.

In 2023 Serbia assumed the Presidency of the [Carpathian Convention](#), which – amongst others - adopted the [Carpathian Biodiversity Framework](#), supporting the implementation of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework at the regional level. The Framework is accompanied by the [COP7 Ministerial Declaration - Empowering the Carpathian Vision 2050](#) corresponding to the global vision of living in harmony with nature, also recognizing the need to address air, water, and soil pollution, with a specific focus on combating plastic pollution in the region's watercourses. Additionally, Serbia launched the development of the Environmental Protection Strategy, which is

⁷⁸ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2023p and [EUROSTAT](#) for comparative data.

⁷⁹ ITU 2023b.

⁸⁰ European Commission 2021 and 2022.

⁸¹ Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure of the Republic of Serbia: “[Clean Serbia](#)” project.

⁸² In 2021, only approximately 67% of city water supply systems provided drinking water of adequate quality, while 33% was found inadequate due to physio-chemical non-compliance, microbiological non-compliance, or both with no significant variations in recent years.

⁸³ It is essential that access to sanitation is enhanced with due regard for geographical disparities and the needs of vulnerable and marginalized groups. Efforts to enhance access could also be anchored to the Protocol on Water and Health to the 1992 Convention, to which Serbia is party.

⁸⁴ United Nations, UNESCO 2021; UNECE 2021a; UNEP 2023.

⁸⁵ European Commission 2023c.

⁸⁶ The latest report was submitted in 2019. See: Government of the Republic of Serbia 2019.

being prepared by a dedicated working group.⁸⁷

When optimally managed, **forests** also play a key role in protecting biodiversity. In Serbia, they cover 29.3% of the country's total area,⁸⁸ within the EU average. To increase the area of national territory under forests to 41.4% by 2050⁸⁹, better forestry policies and practices should be scaled up and additional resources earmarked to tackle the illegal extraction of timber, forest fires, and address pressures from the agricultural, energy, and construction sectors. A key deliverable, expected by the end of 2023, is a new forest inventory system, which, in combination with updated forest management plans, will create a basis for more sustainable forestry management.

The climate crisis and other hazards increasingly affect Serbia

In the summer of 2023, more than 56 municipalities were affected by **extreme weather events**, which caused significant damage to infrastructure, agricultural holdings, and residences, preliminarily evaluated at more than 2.5 billion dinars.⁹⁰ The Serbian government declared a state of emergency across multiple regions, mobilizing extensive relief efforts, including by the international community. These events emphasized the vulnerability of the flood-prone areas, which cover about 1.6 million hectares, including over 500 settlements and critical transport infrastructure⁹¹, and underscored the need for robust emergency preparedness and mitigation measures.

The “[INFORM](#)” [Global Crisis Severity Index](#)” places Serbia in the group of medium-risk and rather stable countries with an average score of 3 (out of 10). Nonetheless, as **disasters increasingly affect Serbia's socioeconomic development and environmental integrity**, criticalities in the Serbian Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Management System – such as the fragmentation of institutional frameworks, complex procedures, and insufficient capacities – must be urgently addressed.

Leveraging the potential of **Nature Based Solutions** (NbS), including in the context of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR), also offers viable and important opportunities. Two recently launched platforms – the [Disaster Risk Register](#) and the [Climate Change Atlas for Serbia](#) – are novel tools that bring together observed and projected climate change data and scenarios at the sub-regional and local level, and are expected to support climate resilient planning and investment. A [Draft of the National Program on Adaptation to Changed Climate Conditions](#) is also undergoing intra-ministerial consultations, aimed at complementing and strengthening the institutional framework. Finally, the increased involvement of Serbian municipalities in the [Make My City Resilient Campaign](#) has also generated increased awareness of the role of local decision makers in DRR.⁹²

Serbia is vulnerable to **industrial accidents and technological disasters**, including those occurring in orphaned and abandoned mine sites, such as tailings. Enhanced capacity is needed for disaster risk reduction and emergency response, multi-hazard and multi-sectoral approaches, enhanced community resilience, and cross-ministerial cooperation.⁹³ A comprehensive road map for the involvement of the health sector in the management of industrially contaminated sites is underway.

⁸⁷ Young Researchers of Serbia 2023.

⁸⁸ Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management of the Republic of Serbia 2009.

⁸⁹ This is one of Serbia's [voluntary targets to achieve Land Degradation Neutrality](#) (LDN) under the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCD).

⁹⁰ As widely reported in the [press](#) at the time. Official statistics are not yet available.

⁹¹ Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning of the Republic of Serbia 2010.

⁹² UNDRR 2023.

⁹³ UNECE 2021b.



3 HUMAN CAPITAL

Human capital in its different dimensions - health, education, skills, knowledge, equality, mobility – has proved resilient during the COVID-19 pandemic, with increased educational attainment resulting from the adoption of key reforms. Continued investments are needed to address the rapid aging of the population, ensure that health outcomes are resilient to crisis, and that educational achievements are in line with the demands of the labour market and are uniformly attained, countrywide.

Demographic trends

Over the last eleven years, **Serbia's population has contracted by 7.5%** (male 7.6% and female 7.4%) due to the decades-long phenomenon of sub-replacement fertility⁹⁴ and outmigration. The natural growth of the population has been negative for over two decades, a trend that was reinforced by the effects of the COVID pandemic.

Serbia is a transit and **migrant-sending country**. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), there were about 700,000 migrants of Serbian origin in OECD countries in 2022,⁹⁵ more than 10% of the Serbian total population. An additional 4.5% of the Serbian population is estimated to be permanently residing in non-OECD countries,⁹⁶ while total remittances accounted for almost 9% of national GDP in 2022.⁹⁷ Migrants outflow is around 30 thousand persons⁹⁸ per year, predominantly comprised of young persons of reproductive age and professionally in demand in both Serbia and EU labour markets (e.g., medical professionals, IT technicians, drivers, construction workers). Cognizant of the challenges of outmigration, in 2021 Serbia adopted the Strategy on Economic Migration for the period 2021-2027 which has the aim of slowing down the departure of the working-age population, strengthening ties with the diaspora, and encouraging returns and circular migration.⁹⁹

Serbia's population is **projected to contract further, about one fifth, by the middle of the century**, making Serbia one of the countries in Europe and the world that are losing their population the fastest, with parts of the country more intensely affected. Belgrade is projected to lose 3.8% of its population and Vojvodina 19.8%, while Western and South-eastern Serbia are forecast to lose 28.5% and 40%, respectively. The population will likely shrink less in those parts of Serbia that can attract internal migrants (Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš, and Subotica), as well as in parts of the country with a younger population and higher fertility rates.¹⁰⁰

According to standard indicators of **population ageing**, Serbia had a 22.1% share of people aged 65 and over in 2022 (19.6% for male, 24.5% for females), above the EU average of 21.1%. The share of older persons increased from the 17.3% (male 15.1% and female 19.6%) measured ten years earlier, placing Serbia in a cohort of East European demographically old countries, along with Bulgaria and Croatia.¹⁰¹ Of particular concern is the unequal impact of successive crises on the wellbeing of older persons. According to a recent simulation, the estimated older persons' poverty rate in 2022 amounted to 12.48%, almost double in comparison to the pre-crisis level.¹⁰² These developments point to the need to prioritize the quality of life of younger and older persons, as well as intergenerational solidarity, which were advanced, among other measures, through:

- The adoption of the [Youth Strategy in the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2023 to 2030](#) in February 2023¹⁰³ - aimed at improving the quality of life of young people, and, in July 2023, the adoption of the Action Plan for the first three years of the Strategy's implementation;
- The adoption of [Strategy for Active and Healthy Aging](#) in September 2023. The strategy is based on the concepts of active aging, gender equality, intergenerational solidarity, lifelong learning, digital competence, education on the health, psychological, and social aspects of aging, and the active participation of older persons in all processes of the social community.

Poverty

The **at-risk-of-poverty rate has slowly been decreasing** in the past 6 years, measuring 20.0% in 2022, 1.2% lower than in 2021. The social exclusion rate declined to 28.1% in 2022, 0.3% lower than in the previous year but still much higher than the EU average of 21.7%.¹⁰⁴ The contraction in at-risk-of-poverty rates in 2022 follows the trend of previous years and puts Serbia's at-risk-of-poverty rates in alignment with the region's average. However, it should be noted that the Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit is no longer functional, meaning continuous monitoring of absolute poverty rates in Serbia has been discontinued, and the at-risk-of-poverty rate can only partially replace this institution. As in previous years, the at-risk-of-poverty rate was measured as highest for individuals up to 18 years of age and those aged from 18 to 24 (20.3 and 20.4% respectively).

A worrying finding from recent data is that **subjective poverty**, as the perceived ability of the household to "make ends meet" was much higher, with more than [88% of Serbian families stating they had some or great difficulty with their budget](#). These findings on perceived poverty were corroborated by the analysis conducted by UNICEF on the impact of the COVID pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine on the most vulnerable groups in Serbia in early 2023, which estimated that the national absolute poverty rate had increased by between 0.3% to 2.5%, depending on the scenario, resulting in poverty rates of 10.4% for the midpoint scenario, 9.2% for the modest scenario, and 11.4% for the worst-case scenario. According to the same simulation, child poverty is expected to increase faster than overall poverty. Even in the most modest scenario, child poverty is expected to increase to 13.8%, representing an additional 27,987 children living below the absolute poverty line.¹⁰⁵

Inequality

Inequality in Serbia has been on the decline, and the decline appears to have continued despite the COVID pandemic and cost of living crisis. In 2022, the Gini coefficient for income measured 32.0%.¹⁰⁶ down from 39.8% in 2016, while the income

⁹⁴ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2022a.

⁹⁵ OECD 2023.

⁹⁶ International Centre for Migration Policy Development 2023.

⁹⁷ World Bank 2022.

⁹⁸ OECD 2023b.

⁹⁹ Government of the Republic of Serbia 2020.

¹⁰⁰ UNDP, UNFPA 2022.

¹⁰¹ EUROSTAT 2023a.

¹⁰² UNFPA 2022.

¹⁰³ Serbia is among the countries in Europe that most improved their Youth progress index score from 2011 to 2022. Notably, Serbia's score improved from 72.98 to 79.91 and its rank from 47th to 42nd. See: European Youth Forum 2023b.

¹⁰⁴ SORS 2022d. and EUROSTAT 2022.

¹⁰⁵ UNICEF 2023b.

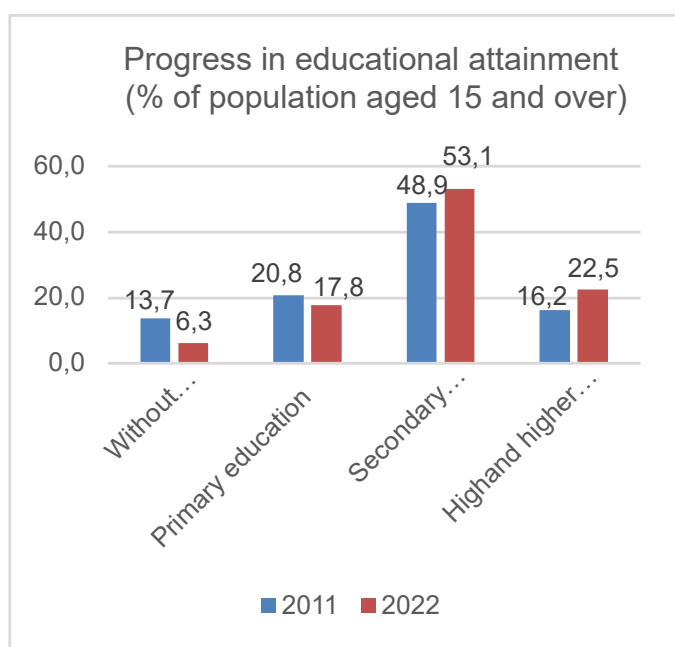
¹⁰⁶ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2023g.

of the richest 20% of the population was [5.5 times higher](#) than that of the poorest 20%, down from a high of 11 times higher in 2016. Still, these values are still considerably higher than the EU-27 averages, which were respectively 30% for the Gini coefficient and 4.74 for the 80%/20% ratio.

Education

The process of making education more inclusive in the Republic of Serbia gathered pace in 2009, with the entry into force of the [Law on the Foundations of the Education System](#), and many visible results have been achieved since then. According to the World Bank's Human Capital Index, Serbia's level of human capital has increased in recent years,¹⁰⁷ reflecting increases both in expected years of schooling as well as quality of learning. Serbia now ranks higher than the average of other upper-middle-income countries.

As shown in the chart below, based on data from the 2011 and



2022 Census, educational attainment has increased and 53.1% (male 58.4% and female 48.1%) of the Serbian adult population aged 15 and over has completed secondary education, while the percentage of people without any educational attainment or incomplete primary education dropped to 6.3% (male 4.0% and female 8.4%). Young people attending **faculties and higher schools** in 2022 accounted for 57.4%¹⁰⁸ of the total generation, with a notable reversal of the gender gap in tertiary education, as seen in most Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ According to the World Bank, HCI value for Serbia increased from 0.65 to 0.68 between 2010 and 2020, meaning that: "A child born in Serbia today will be 68 percent as productive when she grows up as she could be if she enjoyed complete education and full health. See: World Bank 2023d.

¹⁰⁸ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2023o.

¹⁰⁹ For the 2022-23 school year, female enrolled students in tertiary education were 56.6% of total. Ibidem, p. 117.

The **educational attainment of Roma children** remains starkly subpar to that of their peers. Census data shows that only 17.8% of the adult Roma population (22.5% male and 12.8% female) has completed secondary education (against 53.1% in the total Serbian population), while 37.9% (31.7% male and 44.4% female) have no educational attainment or incomplete primary education (against 6.3% in the total Serbian population).¹¹⁰

In this context, Serbia participates in numerous relevant **international assessments**, including Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS), Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), International Computer and Information Literacy Study (ICILS), and Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS). The results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests (performed by children aged 15) conducted in 2022 are below the average of OECD and EU countries in three measured dimensions (reading, mathematics, and science). Despite [Serbia registering progress](#) compared to the 2018 results, the country is still behind the OECD average in both the mathematics and reading literacy scales. Significantly better results were achieved on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) test and PIRLS (2021 cycle), both of which are conducted in the fourth grade of primary school, and this difference might be explained by more adequate support from teachers in lower school grades.¹¹¹

Notably, the re-orientation of new curricula in preschool on relations, wellbeing, and the development of learning dispositions, and in primary, secondary, and vocational education towards learning processes and outcomes, rather than subject content, is a key pillar of the [Strategy for the Development of Education in the Republic of Serbia until 2030](#),¹¹² which was adopted in February 2021. This approach is also one of the commitments made by the Ministry of Education at the 2022 **Global Transforming Education Summit**, organized during the 77th UN General Assembly, and is in line with both the SDG4 framework and the country's aspirations for joining the EU.¹¹³

The [Education 2030 Framework for Action](#) has set two key finance benchmarks for governments:

- To allocate at least 4% to 6% of GDP to education. Serbia's planned expenditure on education as foreseen in the 2024 budget has increased substantially from previous years - through increases in teachers' salaries¹¹⁴ and planned fixed investments in scientific and educational centers¹¹⁵ - and is now approximately 3.6% of GDP¹¹⁶, though this is still lower than Serbia's pledge and the EU average of 4.7%;

¹¹⁰ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2023k and UNICEF 2020.

¹¹¹ World Bank 2023b, page 24.

¹¹² Along with the focus on inclusive and competences-based learning.

¹¹³ Government of the Republic of Serbia 2022b.

¹¹⁴ According to the [Budget of the Republic of Serbia](#) (page 329), the salaries for educators will be increased by 10% starting from January 2024.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, page 81.

¹¹⁶ The percentage was calculated by the authors, based on the official estimate of GDP and broadly corresponds to [expert analysis](#). See: Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Serbia 2023d and Government of the Republic of Serbia 2023e.

- To allocate at least 15% to 20% of public expenditure to education. In 2018, the latest year for which complete data were available, Serbia was below target, having spent 9.3%, slightly less than the average for the EU27 of 9.9%.¹¹⁷ It should be noted that while the overall level of public spending on education is below regional averages, the number of students has also declined, resulting in modest increases in per-student spending at the primary and secondary education level.¹¹⁸

Serbia is an important partner in advancing education for sustainable development (ESD), working closely with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), UNECE, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to upscale efforts for the implementation of the [UNECE Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development \(2021-2030\)](#) at all levels, in particular to strengthen environmental democracy and to empower learners of all ages with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes to address interconnected global challenges.

Health outcomes and health resilience

The Serbian **health system has made significant progress** over the last decade and coped relatively effectively with the challenges brought by the COVID pandemic. Outcomes have improved and more services are delivered at a lower cost. Some recent regulatory and policy developments are expected to contribute to further strengthening the system performance, including, among others, the new [Law on Health Records](#), which will be implemented starting in 2025, and a new [Program on Health Digitalization](#).

Despite the contraction of the health workforce by about 6% in the last ten years,¹¹⁹ the **number of physicians and nurses per 100,000 people in Serbia** – and similarly the number of hospital beds – has been stable since 1990, largely due to negative demographic trends. Overall, the numbers of doctors and nurses working in the system per 100,000 people **remain comparable to those of EU countries**.¹²⁰ A key concern is that these average figures hide important variations across the country, as the medical workforce tends to be concentrated in urban areas with better infrastructure, medical universities, and highly specialized medical centres.¹²¹ Going forward, Serbia needs to design an integrated model of primary health care,

incorporating a range of services including mental health and noncommunicable diseases (NCDs).

Public health expenditure in Serbia has been steadily increasing in recent years¹²² and universal health coverage (UHC) is provided in line with SDG Target 3.8 through the mandatory health care insurance of the whole population. **Out-of-pocket expenditures**, however, are very high, accounting for 37% of health expenditures in 2020¹²³ compared to the EU average of 15.4%, which raises important fairness and effectiveness concerns, with medicines as the main driver of out-of-pocket spending, especially for the poor.

Mortality and morbidity rates from both noncommunicable diseases and communicable diseases remain high. **Chronic NCDs** account for 94% of all deaths in Serbia, while 1 in 5 (19.5%) NCD deaths are of those under the age of 60. Considered together, cardiovascular diseases (CVDs) and cancers account for two-thirds of all mortality. Many Serbian citizens tend to have unhealthy lifestyles, characterized by inadequate dietary intake, alcohol use, and low engagement in sport and recreation.¹²⁴ Additionally, Serbia has made limited progress in tobacco control, and the World Health Organization (WHO) Framework Convention on Tobacco Control is not fully implemented and inadequately enforced. The use of tobacco in public places is not aligned with EU recommendations; there is no ban on smoking in the hospitality sector and the collateral environmental pollution is severe. The new law and strategy on tobacco control was drafted and remains to be adopted.

The environment is also a major determinant of health and as a signatory of the **Budapest Declaration** and of its Roadmap for healthier people, a thriving planet and a sustainable future (2023-2030), Serbia has *inter alia* committed to: tackle the health and wellbeing impacts of climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss; further integrate the One Health approach; and set up strategies and frameworks for the safe management of waste and for the identification and remediation of contaminated sites.

Regarding **communicable diseases**, the burden of tuberculosis (TB) has decreased significantly due to the consistent implementation of the National TB Programme in line with the WHO TB strategies, which resulted in the reduction of the TB notification rate by 80% to 9/100,000 in 2019, strengthening Serbia's position among the low TB burden countries in Europe. According to the latest data from the Institute of Public Health Serbia (IPHS), the TB notification rate in 2021 was 3.75/100,000, though this was likely indicative of incomplete case registration due to the COVID-19 epidemic, similar to 2020 when the TB

¹¹⁷ UNICEF 2022, p. 38.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, p. 59.

¹¹⁹ The total number of health care professionals shrank from 112,587 in 2012 to 105,601 in 2022. See: Institute for Public Health Dr. Milan Jovanovic Batut, 2012 and 2022.

¹²⁰ The number of physicians employed in Serbia by public health institutions per 100,000 inhabitants was 295 in 2021, against EU values ranging from 318.3 in France to 629.2 in Greece in 2021. As for nurses, the ratio in Serbia was 632 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2021 against EU values ranging from 338 in Greece to 1600 in Ireland. It should be noted that as regards physicians, in Serbia, statistics refer only to personnel employed by the public health sector, hence the claim that this is comparable to EU averages stands. Institute for Public Health of Serbia Dr. Milan Jovanovic Batut 2022 and [Eurostat database](#).

¹²¹ The number of physicians per 100,000 ranged from a low of 189 in Srem to a high of 443 in the Belgrade area. (Institute of Public Health of Serbia Dr Milan Jovanovic Batut 2022), which implies gaps in specialists and low availability in less populated areas. The scarcity of medical professionals is also due, among other factors, to the outmigration of doctors from Serbia to EU countries. According to estimates, over 10,000 doctors have left Serbia in the past 20 years, with Germany the most popular destination for Serbian health professionals.

¹²² According to the WHO [Serbia Country Profile](#), per capita health expenditure increased by over 35% between 2015 and 2020.

¹²³ WHO 2019.

¹²⁴ As regards nutrition, the FAO European Office programme on "Transforming food systems" is currently developing food system-based dietary guidelines for the region, also through the [CAPNUTRA network](#). As regards mobility, the [Transport Health and Environment Pan European Programme \(THE PEP\)](#) and [THE PEP implementation mechanisms towards achieving healthy, green and sustainable transport and mobility](#) could also provide Serbia with needed guidance. Please also see the [Budapest Declaration](#), which has endorsed a new partnership to support active mobility.

notification rate was 5/100,000. The latest IPHS data¹²⁵ show that in 2021 Serbia had registered 172 **Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)** cases, 49 new Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) cases, and 14 AIDS deaths. Most new cases were in the age group of 30 to 49 years, while related counselling and testing has now bounced back to pre-pandemic levels. The **impact of the COVID pandemic** is still being felt, as can be inferred from the latest statistics for life expectancy at birth, which was 76.0 years in 2019 but had declined to 72.8 years in 2021 ([Eurostat, 2023](#)). While this was a trend worldwide, the drop in Serbia was significantly larger than the EU average, where this indicator fell from 81.3 to 80.1 years, and further widens the country's gap compared to the more advanced countries of the region.

The mental health of children and young people is an issue of growing concern in Serbia. The tragic school shooting in May 2023 put in the spotlight the limited availability of services for psychosocial support for this age group. The first epidemiological study of the **prevalence of mental disorders** in Serbia was conducted in 2022, targeting the adult population, while a dedicated study for the youth is not available.¹²⁶ Among people aged 18-25, the diagnosis of a disorder related to the use of alcohol was three times more common compared to older respondents; up to 19% of young people used alcohol in a way that required the immediate intervention of the health service, while in the 26-65 age group the percentage was around 6%. Disorders from the anxiety spectrum were diagnosed in about 6% of young people, and disorders from the depression spectrum were found in about 4%.

In spite of the prevalence of mental health disorders, a '[U-Report](#)' survey conducted in August 2023 revealed that approximately 47 percent of respondents refrained from seeking help because they feared it might be perceived as a sign of weakness and they were concerned about being judged. The survey further indicated that nearly half of the young people surveyed, or 46 percent of them, turned to social media and the internet as their primary source of information on how to maintain good mental health. Only five percent of them indicated teachers, and seven percent health workers, as individuals they could confide in regarding their problems.

Welcome recent developments, following intense efforts by UN Agencies in country, include:

- [Guidelines for primary and secondary schools](#), emphasizing mutual respect, cooperation, and solidarity, as well as respect for diversity, were issued in August 2023;
- Six ministries signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to enhance the dedicated mental health support system, clarifying the allocation of resources and the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders in child, adolescent, and young people's mental health protection.¹²⁷ An inter-ministerial working group to support the implementation of the MoU is being set up;

- Some important law and policy documents are pending, including the Action Plan for the National Programme for the Protection of Mental Health for all Citizens of the Republic of Serbia for 2023-2026.

In the area of **sexual and reproductive health**, the government showed its commitment to reducing cervical cancer related morbidity and mortality through continual promotion of Human Papillomavirus (HPV) immunization, which was made available free of charge for boys and girls aged 9-19 and has been fully covered by state health insurance since June 2022,¹²⁸ and through the efforts of all relevant actors to improve the coverage and quality of screening for the cancer of reproductive organs.¹²⁹ Efforts should continue – in this and other areas - to identify the main drivers and barriers toward **immunization** and plan activities to promote awareness of vaccination benefits, both among the general public and for vulnerable populations.

Further attention in the health sector should also be given to effective, sustainable financing of disease-specific strategies. Public health services should be strengthened to reverse the trends in NCDs through tobacco control and by paying enhanced attention to diet, physical exercise, and mental health. Measures related to environmental health should also be strengthened, particularly in following up on the COP28 [UAE Declaration on Climate and Health](#) – which was signed by Serbia and calls for better integration of health considerations into climate policy processes and of climate considerations across health policy agendas.

Children's health

During the last ten years the **neonatal mortality has declined progressively**, reaching 4.0 per 1,000 live births in 2021, approaching the EU average, and achieving the global target of SDG Goal 3.2,¹³⁰ while the under-5 mortality rate was 5 per 1,000 newborns. The maternal mortality rate, which had been declining since 2012, showed an increase during the Covid-19 pandemic though still remained below the target set in SDG 3.1. It has since declined again, but to a level above pre-pandemic trends.¹³¹ Exclusive breastfeeding has increased since 2014 (by 13%) but remains low (24%), even if it is broadly on par with EU averages.

The values of the **perinatal mortality rate** in Serbia have been declining in the last 20 years but are still relatively high compared to developed European countries. [The perinatal mortality rate in Serbia](#) was 7.5 per 1,000 births in 2022, approximately 30% below the average of EU member countries before 2020 (5.5 per 1000 live births in 2021). There are significant regional disparities. Districts oriented towards Clinical Centres and neonatal intensive care units in Niš, and to some extent Kragujevac,

¹²⁵ Institute of Public Health of Serbia Dr Milan Jovanovic Batut 2022.

¹²⁶ See: GIZ 2022. The survey was conducted in 2022 on a sample of 1,000 citizens aged 18 to 65. A similar study targeting children and adolescents up to 18 in Serbia does not exist.

¹²⁷ Ministry of Tourism and Youth of the Republic of Serbia 2023.

¹²⁸ As of October 2023, the immunization rate for the HPV vaccine was around 4%.

¹²⁹ In 2023 the Ministry of Family Welfare and Demography initiated the development of a new strategy to promote sexual and reproductive health.

¹³⁰ See: Institute of Public Health of the Republic of Serbia Dr Milan Jovanovic Batut 2022. The Global Goal is 12 per 1,000 live births.

¹³¹ Defined as the number of women who died during pregnancy, childbirth, or the puerperium due to complications associated with these conditions (maternal deaths) per 100,000 live births. The global target is 70 per 100,000 live births. See: Institute of Public Health of Serbia Dr Milan Jovanovic Batut, 2022.

have been registering the highest perinatal mortality rates in the country, which may indicate limited capacities and the ineffective organization of health services.

In terms of **vaccination rates**, Serbia – which had traditionally outperformed some of its European peers – partially bounced back from challenges encountered in the post-COVID years. In 2022, for example, 89% of children received the 2nd dose of measles-containing vaccine as per the national schedule, up from 81% in 2020, and just short of the 91% achieved in the pre-pandemic years.¹³² In June 2022, the HPV vaccine, which is recommended but not mandatory, became available free of charge (covered by the State Health Insurance Fund) for both boys and girls aged 9 to 19. The continued education of health professionals, parents, and teachers and promotional activities among the public are further needed to fully realize the benefits of high vaccination rates with the HPV vaccine.

Access to services remains uneven across the population, limiting the progress towards universal coverage set by SDG Target 3.8. Access was not necessarily related to income poverty. For example, in thirteen out of twenty-five Serbian districts, more than 15% of children had not received Measles Mumps and Rubella (MMR) vaccinations, while in four out of twenty five districts, the same percentage was documented regarding children receiving Hepatitis B (HepB3) vaccinations by age 1.¹³³ And while the public health system has made significant progress in reaching out to the Roma population with antenatal and neonatal care, with the percentage of Roma children aged 24-35 months who had received full vaccination increasing from 44 per cent in 2014 to 63 per cent in 2019, Roma continue to lag behind the national average of 80 per cent.¹³⁴

One Health

The **“One Health” approach** – which aims to balance and optimize the health of people, animals and the environment – is an important priority to prevent, predict, detect, and respond to complex health challenges and threats facing our societies.

Serbia has a relatively well-developed record in this space: a National Bridging Workshop was held in 2019, resulting in a joint roadmap for improved One Health Collaboration¹³⁵. These efforts could be revived with the support of the “Quadripartite organizations” (Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), UNEP, WHO, and World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH)) to strengthen collaboration across various sectors and sustain the prevention of pandemics and health threats at source, by addressing ecosystem degradation, food system failures, infectious diseases, and antimicrobial resistance.

Social protection

Social protection systems (through the four pillars of social assistance, social services, social insurance and employment

and labour market programs) are a key instrument for reducing poverty and social inequalities. Overall, the **total social protection expenditure is low in Serbia**, both in terms of per capita expenditure (totalling EUR 2,800 in Serbia in 2021, against EUR 9,094 in the EU-27 in 2021)¹³⁶ and as a percentage of GDP (19.1% of GDP in Serbia in 2020, far below the EU-27 average of 30.2%).¹³⁷ At the same time, the pressure on the social protection system (in centres for social work) is substantial and increasing, against a shrinking number of staff employed by the system.¹³⁸

The establishment of the “Social Security Card” registry which was aimed at strengthening the system and increasing its coherence has proved controversial. According to the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran, and Social Affairs (MoLEVSA), this registry helped citizens exercise their rights more easily and quickly, while also allowing the administration to identify cases of unfounded payments.¹³⁹ Contrarily, laments from civil society argued that the system instead resulted in the administration accessing an excessive amount of personal data and led to 27,000 beneficiaries losing their rights, primarily affecting the Roma national minority residing in substandard settlements.¹⁴⁰ The Network for Economic Social Cultural Rights has initiated a constitutional review.

Serbia’s social assistance system is designed and implemented by the Centres for Social Work (CSW) and the social welfare departments in local self-governments (LSGs). Notably, most cash benefits are subject to national regulation and are financed by the national budget. The core programmes for social assistance can be categorized between means-tested and categorical, mainly targeting poor households, people with disabilities, working mothers, and households with children.¹⁴¹

Social assistance - as one of the four pillars- has seen important shifts towards categorical programmes of social assistance,¹⁴² especially those focusing on pro-natal benefits, which are overtaking poverty-targeted programmes as the largest social assistance programmes. Looking only at poverty-targeted programme spending, Serbia spends under a third of the European average,¹⁴³ with both inadequate population coverage and a low amount of social security benefits leading to the ineffectiveness of the social security system in reducing poverty,¹⁴⁴ affecting progress towards SDG 1.3. The adoption of a new **Strategy for Social Protection** and amendments to the **Law on Social Protection** are still pending. **Law on Social Protection** are still pending.

¹³⁶ EUROSTAT 2023d.

¹³⁷ EUROSTAT 2023e.

¹³⁸ Republic Institute for Social Protection 2021.

¹³⁹ Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Policy of the Republic of Serbia 2023b and the Initiative for Economic and Social Rights 2022.

¹⁴⁰ Initiative for Economic and Social Rights 2023a.

¹⁴¹ UNICEF 2023b.

¹⁴² Categorical targeting consists in selecting individuals belonging to a certain category of people using observable characteristics that do not require the collection of a large amount of data.

¹⁴³ UNICEF 2022, page 10.

¹⁴⁴ UN Economic and Social Council 2022.

¹³² WHO 2023c.

¹³³ Institute for Public Health of Serbia Dr Milan Jovanovic Batut 2023b.

¹³⁴ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia and UNICEF (2020).

¹³⁵ This was never officially adopted but remains a de facto reference.



4 HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE RULE OF LAW, Leaving No One Behind (LNOB)

UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS STANDARDS

Overall assessment shows that Serbia's **legal framework is mostly harmonized with international human rights standards**.¹⁴⁵ Greater focus should be placed on the implementation on national and local levels, as well as on tackling the apathy visible in the system and on people's behaviors and beliefs. Human rights and the rule of law are also shaped and assessed through the EU accession process and addressed specifically in the relevant EU Acquis chapters. These mechanisms are considered foundational and are given the utmost priority in the corresponding negotiations.

Cooperation with UN Human Rights Mechanisms

The Republic of Serbia continuously cooperates with and **submits regular reports to UN Human Rights Mechanisms**, including treaty bodies and the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). It engages regularly with UN Special Procedures and facilitates field visits.¹⁴⁶ Many relevant civil society and independent institutions also have active and regular cooperation with UN Human Rights Mechanisms within their mandates.¹⁴⁷

The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression visited Serbia and Kosovo¹⁴⁸ in March/April, with the preliminary observations being published in the [End-of-Mission Report](#).¹⁴⁹ In July, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Guarantees of Non-recurrence published a [report on the visit to Serbia and Kosovo](#)¹⁵⁰ in late 2022. The Republic of Serbia underwent the 4th UPR review in May 2023, with the [UPR outcome report](#)¹⁵¹ consisting of 256 recommendations, out of which Serbia supported a vast majority. Most of the recommendations refer to media freedoms, civic space, the independence of the judiciary, gender-based violence, the rights of the child, LGBTIQ+, migrants, national minorities, persons with disabilities (antidiscrimination), and war crimes. Recommendations that were not supported addressed the unresolved transitional justice process, relations with neighboring countries, and the improvement of the human rights of LGBTIQ+ persons.

¹⁴⁵ Fundamental human rights and freedoms are enshrined in the Constitution. Serbia is bound by eight of the nine UN core human rights treaties (The International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families is the exception), the European Convention on Human Rights, and numerous Council of Europe (CoE) conventions. A list of signed CoE conventions is available on the website of the Council of Europe. The ratification of the optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child related to the communication procedure is pending.

¹⁴⁶ Serbia has had a standing invitation to Special Procedures since 2005.

¹⁴⁷ Through their regular monitoring and reporting on the implementation of human rights standards, as well as through communication with special procedures or treaty bodies in individual cases. For more information, see [OHCHR](#).

¹⁴⁸ All references to Kosovo should be understood to be in the context of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

¹⁴⁹ UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion of Truth, Justice, Reparations and Guarantees of Non-recurrences, Report on the visit to Serbia and Kosovo 2023.

¹⁵⁰ All references to Kosovo should be understood to be in the context of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

¹⁵¹ Human Rights Council 2023.

The Government's Council for Monitoring, Reporting and Follow-up to UN Human Rights Mechanisms (NMRF), chaired by the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, nationalized the National Recommendations Tracking Database (NRTD) developed by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to simplify the continuous and systematic monitoring, implementation, follow-up, and reporting to UN Human Rights Mechanisms. This database will also be instrumental in producing national human rights reports as part of the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue's plans.

Law and policy development processes

At the beginning of 2023, the Parliament adopted a new set of judicial laws following the previously adopted constitutional changes in the area of the judiciary in 2022. Additionally, the Law on Public Information and Media and the Law on Electronic Media,¹⁵² adopted in October, usher in important improvements addressing existing concerns.

The new National Youth Strategy 2023-2030 was adopted in January 2023 as well as a budgeted Action Plan in July 2023.¹⁵³ The Strategy for Active and Healthy Aging for the period 2024-2030 was adopted in September 2023 and will be effective as of 1st January 2024. The Council for Monitoring the Implementation of the Anti-Discrimination Strategy for the period 2022-2030, comprised of representatives from all relevant ministries, independent institutions, civil society organizations (CSOs), academia, and development partners, was established to ensure the participation of various societal groups and the implementation of the LNOB principle.¹⁵⁴ The Action Plan¹⁵⁵ within the scope of the Strategy for Improving the Status of Persons with Disabilities, as well as the new Action Plan¹⁵⁶ for the Education Development Strategy, were also adopted. The Action Plan 2023-2025 for the Implementation of the National Strategy for the Realization of the Rights of Victims and Witnesses of Criminal Offences was adopted in August.

The Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina adopted in April 2023 the Development Plan for the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina for the period 2023-2030, which is gender-responsive, as well as the Program for the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence, Violence in Partner Relations, and other Forms of Gender-based Violence in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina from 2023-2026.

The process of implementing and localizing the LNOB Tool continued. Over 60 representatives from local self-government units participated in training sessions, and the LNOB Tool was presented to the academic community and students at the Faculty of Law in Belgrade and Kragujevac.

Many laws and policy documents are in the development process

¹⁵² Ministry of Information and Telecommunications of the Republic of Serbia 2023.

¹⁵³ Government of the Republic of Serbia 2023b.

¹⁵⁴ Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue of the Republic of Serbia 2023b.

¹⁵⁵ Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Policy of the Republic of Serbia 2023a.

¹⁵⁶ Government of the Republic of Serbia 2023a.

or pending. These include but are not limited to those regulating the rights of LGBTIQ+ persons, National Development Plan, Human Rights Strategy, Anticorruption Strategy, Strategy for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, Strategy on Birth Promotion, Strategy on Sexual and Reproductive Health, Action Plan for the Implementation of the Strategy for the Prevention of and Protection from Discrimination, Action Plan for the National Strategy for Combating Gender-Based Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, Action Plan for the Implementation of the Gender Equality Strategy, Action Plan for the Implementation of UNSCR 1325 on the Women Peace and Security Agenda, Action Plan for the Realization of the Rights of National Minorities, Action Plan for the Republic Program for Mental Health Protection for all Citizens of the Republic of Serbia; Action Plan for the Implementation of the Strategy for Deinstitutionalization and the Development of Local Services, General protocol on proceedings and multisectoral cooperation in situations of gender-based violence and violence against women and girls, Roadmap for Implementing Urban Safety Measures in the Urban Planning Process, and many more.

Human Rights 75 Initiative

The whole 2023 year was marked by the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) – the **Human Rights 75 Initiative**¹⁵⁷. The national initiative was led by the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, and encompassed a set of events including social dialogues, discussions, conferences, social media campaigns, and more, which were implemented jointly with relevant state authorities, independent institutions, UN and other development partners, civil society, academia, communities, and media. An important positive development and outcome of the Human Rights 75 (HR75) initiative was the ratification of the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights¹⁵⁸ regarding communication procedures, while the ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of a Child regarding communication procedures is in process.

RULE OF LAW AND DEMOCRACY

Civic space (media freedoms, freedom of assembly, protests, HRDs, CSOs)

The establishment of the Council for Stimulating the Development of Civil Society,¹⁵⁹ in September 2023, is a noteworthy move towards fostering collaboration between the government and civil CSOs. This institutional mechanism represents an important model for promoting structured dialogue, which is essential for encouraging open and constructive relationships. There is a need for further support for an enabling environment for CSOs, as verbal attacks and smear

campaigns against such organizations remain common.¹⁶⁰

The tragic events in May and the perceived lack of a resolute commitment by the state to address the cases of violence have sparked widespread peaceful protests, generally occurring once a week, primarily in Belgrade but occasionally in other cities as well (27 protests in total). These citizens' protests have received strong support from opposition political parties.

Attacks on human rights defenders, activists, opposition leaders, and journalists have been rising continuously, as per available databases.¹⁶¹ Among those most often targeted are organizations and individuals, including investigative journalists, working in the area of transitional justice, the green agenda, anti-corruption, LGBTIQ+ rights, and opposition leaders in the pre-election period. Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP lawsuits) have been frequently documented, often resulting in financial pressures and human overload by those charged.

Concerns regarding freedom of expression and information in Serbia remain significant, with no progress having been observed in the investigation and prosecution of attacks on journalists and the media, which, unfortunately, continue to occur. The ownership of media by state-owned enterprises, alongside political and economic influence, remains a source of concern regarding media pluralism and editorial independence.¹⁶² Legal reforms should be accompanied by effective implementation of laws and political will to combat dangerous rhetoric, and that all institutions should implement the constitutional and legal framework upholding freedom of expression while combating hate speech and disinformation, as well as ensure that the REM is independent, effective, and accountable.¹⁶³

While the two media laws mentioned above¹⁶⁴ usher in important improvements in this area. However, strong concerns have been raised regarding the election of new REM Council members, the allowing of state-owned enterprises to own media, the absence of judicial or civil control over the REM's actions, and the absence of provisions to limit officials' campaigns and prescribe criteria and methodology based on which the REM monitors media reporting during election campaigns.¹⁶⁵ With the introduction of the two new media laws, there is a potential that the foundation has been laid for even greater control over the flow of information.

Elections

Early Parliamentary elections were held on December 17, 2023, concurrent with local elections in 65 local self-governments. These were the third parliamentary elections in four years and represent the latest in a series of consecutive elections called for before the end of the parliament's traditional mandate. Prepara-

¹⁵⁷ OHCHR 2023a.

¹⁵⁸ Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue of the Republic of Serbia 2023c.

¹⁵⁹ Belgrade Open School 2023.

¹⁶⁰ European Commission 2023a.

¹⁶¹ YUCOM Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights 2023.

¹⁶² [Independent Journalists Association of Serbia](#); Human Rights Council 2023; United Nations Human Rights Special Procedures 2023.

¹⁶³ UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion of Truth, Justice, Reparations and Guarantees of Non-recurrences, Report on the visit to Serbia and Kosovo 2023.

¹⁶⁴ Ministry of Information and Telecommunications of the Republic of Serbia 2023.

¹⁶⁵ [Independent Journalists Association of Serbia](#) 2023.

tions for the elections were taking place amid deep political and social polarization and ongoing weekly mass protests demanding social and political changes, including calls for the resignation of senior law enforcement officials and those currently in power in the government. In September, members of the opposition requested early elections as none of their demands had been fulfilled, and they began boycotting parliamentary sessions. In parallel, opposition leaders refused to participate in the dialogue with the Government.

According to the available reports, available at the time of writing this report, the frequent early elections have undermined public confidence in democratic institutions, exacerbated by a lack of political will to address necessary reforms. While fundamental freedoms were mostly respected during the campaign, it was marred by harsh rhetoric, media bias, pressure on public sector employees, and misuse of public resources. Although the media complied with legal requirements by featuring all electoral contestants, the majority of national broadcasters failed to provide authentic analytical reporting, thereby diminishing voters' capacity to make well-informed decisions. The election day proceeded without major disruptions; however, it was characterized by numerous procedural shortcomings. These included the uneven implementation of safeguards during voting and counting, frequent overcrowding, compromises in the secrecy of the vote, and numerous instances of group voting. The enduring suggestion from the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and Venice Commission to carry out a comprehensive audit of the voter list had not been put into practice. The authorities attributed this to legal constraints related to personal data privacy. The Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) maintained a passive approach during the campaign.¹⁶⁶

Based on initial data from the elections, the ruling party holds the majority of votes at the Parliamentary level, while in the Belgrade elections, preliminary results indicate closely contested outcomes. The opposition announced a protest a day after the elections in front of the Republic Election Commission, and requested the abolishment of the election results in Belgrade due to the multiple irregularities.¹⁶⁷

Judiciary

In the beginning of 2023, the Parliament of the Republic of Serbia adopted a new set of judicial laws following the previously adopted constitutional changes in the area of the judiciary in 2022, following the referendum in 2022.¹⁶⁸ In March 2023 the Venice Commission confirmed that the revised drafts corresponded to the recommendations previously provided. In particular, the laws now indicate that court presidents should not interfere with the adjudication process, and a general rule prohibiting interference with the conduct of court proceedings in individual cases was introduced. Possibilities for the secondment of judges are now further restricted, with evaluation criteria mentioned in the law, while the notion of “repeated disciplinary

offense” is now defined more precisely. The notion of “improper influence” on the work of the courts was also further defined.

Still, some recommendations were not sufficiently addressed: the interrelation between the procedure of dismissal in this context and the corresponding disciplinary proceedings, as well as the role of the High Prosecutorial Council (HPC) and the High Judicial Council (HJC) in these proceedings, remain somewhat unclear. The Venice Commission concluded that these draft laws were an important advance in the process of bringing the Serbian judiciary in line with European standards.¹⁶⁹ The 8 judges that comprise the HJC and HPC were elected by the National Assembly in May 2023. The process of the selection of these judges was met with strong reactions from the expert community, many pointing out that the whole process largely remains in the political domain, as candidates did not receive the adequate majority in the Parliament (National Assembly), but rather were chosen by the alternative voting of the relevant Commission comprised of 5 members elected by the Parliament.¹⁷⁰

The formation of the High Prosecutorial Council, consisting of representatives of public prosecutors and prominent lawyers, in May 2023, was also met with serious criticism from the expert community.

Independent institutions

The Protector of Citizens is Serbia's leading National Human Rights Institution (NHRI) with “A” status. As the mandate of the Ombudsperson expired in mid-2022, the process of appointment of the new Ombudsman was initiated in 2023. The same Ombudsperson was re-elected as the Ombudsman, for a period of 8 years, according to the new Law on the Protector of Citizens.¹⁷¹ According to the Ombudsman's Annual reports from 2022 and 2023, the number of citizens' complaints to the institution has seen a decline. The Ombudsman, as the national rapporteur on human trafficking, intensified activities aimed at improving the situation and increasing proactive action in the area of human trafficking, including familiarizing the relevant state authorities and organizations with the role of the Protector of Citizens as national rapporteur in the field of human trafficking.¹⁷²

However, there are strong concerns regarding the independence of the Ombudsperson raised by civil society organizations, due to the absence of prompt reactions on gross human rights violations in Serbia.

The Commissioner for the Protection of Equality continues in an active and timely manner to respond to discrimination cases. A significant number of opinions, recommendations, and initiatives¹⁷³ have been issued in various areas including gender inequality, discrimination against persons with disabilities, older persons, the Roma population, LGBTIQ+ people, and children. The Commissioner reacted to and strongly condemned hate and neo-Nazi graffiti that appeared in Novi Sad,¹⁷⁴ as well as is-

¹⁶⁶ European Parliament, OSCE ODIHR, OSCE PA, Parliamentary Assembly, Council of Europe 2023; Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA) 2023.

¹⁶⁷ According to the information and data available on 18 December 2023.

¹⁶⁸ Government of the Republic of Serbia 2023h.

¹⁶⁹ Council of Europe 2023b.

¹⁷⁰ European Western Balkans 2023.

¹⁷¹ Protector of Citizens, Ombudsman of Serbia 2023b.

¹⁷² Protector of Citizens, Ombudsman of Serbia 2023a.

¹⁷³ Commissioner for Protection of Equality of the Republic of Serbia 2023b.

¹⁷⁴ Commissioner for Protection of Equality of the Republic of Serbia 2023c.

sued a recommendation of measures for free textbooks for all children in Serbia, not only those living in the capital.¹⁷⁵

Corruption

Serbia is a State party to the [United Nations Convention against Corruption](#) and actively participates in the Second Cycle of its Implementation Review mechanism, focusing on the prevention of corruption and the recovery of assets. Serbia actively participates in the implementation of the Regional Illicit Finance and Anti-corruption Roadmap. The implementation of this Roadmap will result in the delivery of tangible improvements to the implementation of the UN Convention against Corruption.

Since 2018, the government has failed to develop a new anti-corruption strategy and has allowed problematic policies to persist. However, a new anti-corruption strategy is currently in development. Problematic policies include engaging in direct negotiations over valuable infrastructure projects and withholding public contracting information from the public. Investigative journalists, whistleblowers, activists, and members of law enforcement who have exposed potentially corrupt practices have faced pressure from state institutions. Overall, corruption is prevalent in many areas and remains an issue of concern.¹⁷⁶ The European Commission noted that limited progress has been made and that there is a need for strong political will to effectively address corruption issues and for a robust criminal justice response to high-level corruption.

Human trafficking

The Strategy for the Prevention and Suppression of Trafficking in Human Beings (THB), Especially Women and Children, and for the Protection of the Victims expired at the end of 2022. The new document of public policy on combating trafficking in human beings is currently being drafted and is expected to be finalized in the upcoming period. This new strategic document is expected to provide a framework for combating human trafficking effectively. There is a need for vigorous investigation and prosecution of trafficking crimes and migrant smuggling crimes. It is imperative to impose appropriate penalties, including substantial prison terms for convicted traffickers/smugglers and complicit officials. Efforts must be increased to proactively identify victims, especially among vulnerable groups such as migrants, individuals engaged in commercial sex, refugees, asylum-seekers, and unaccompanied children involved in street begging. In addition, training programs for investigators, prosecutors, judges, and other relevant stakeholders focusing on victim-centered approaches, as well as further inter-agency, regional, and international cooperation, should be enhanced. Amendments to the Law on Foreigners and related laws, including a recovery and reflection period, as well as the provision of temporary residence permits based on humanitarian grounds for victims of trafficking, represent steps forward. These changes reflect a commitment to protecting the rights and well-being of the most vulnerable categories in society.

Transnational Organized Crime

Serbia is a State party to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC), which is the main international instrument in the fight against transnational organized crime. Serbia also ratified three UNTOC Protocols – the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants, and the Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms (Firearms Protocol). Despite the ratification of the Protocols, limited progress was made in the detection and prevention of migrants smuggling and trafficking in human beings.¹⁷⁷ Serbia participates in the implementation of the Roadmap for a sustainable solution to arms control in the Western Balkans by 2024 (Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) Roadmap), to which UNODC contributes through multiple projects. The implementation of the SALW Roadmap will result in harmonization of domestic criminal legislation with the Firearms Protocol and will improve domestic capacities to identify, prevent, prosecute, and adjudicate the illegal possession, misuse, and trafficking of firearms, ammunition, and explosives.

Transitional justice

Serbia has consistently demonstrated a relatively active approach to truth-finding initiatives, particularly concerning the fate of missing persons and the pursuit of justice. However, progress in this area is dependent on the collaborative efforts of neighboring countries. Reparations remain a sensitive topic that requires further attention and effort, along with the important aspects of memorialization and the establishment of guarantees to prevent the recurrence of past atrocities. The law that recognizes the status of missing persons and their families in compliance with international standards is missing. There is a need for the allocation of sufficient resources for and the acceleration of the search for and identification of missing persons, as well as urgent, unrestricted, and continued access to all information and archives available, the acceleration of the prosecution and adjudication of war crime cases at all levels of hierarchy and effective and comprehensive witness protection services, as well as the acceleration of the processing of reparation claims, among other appeals.¹⁷⁸

LNOB

The **Leave No One Behind principle** represents an unequivocal commitment to eradicate poverty in all its forms, end discrimination and exclusion, and ensure that development, policies, or initiatives benefit all individuals and groups, particularly those who are the most excluded and discriminated against. The Republic of Serbia is the first country to have developed a tool that operationalizes this principle and provides clear guidelines to decision-makers and other relevant actors for its application in the processes of proposing,

¹⁷⁵ Commissioner for Protection of Equality of the Republic of Serbia 2023a.

¹⁷⁶ European Commission 2023a.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion of Truth, Justice, Reparations and Guarantees of Non-recurrences, Report on the visit to Serbia and Kosovo 2023.

adopting, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating legal and policy documents at all levels. The implementation of the LNOB Tool in law and policy development processes is ongoing.

Women

Measures taken and progress achieved by Serbia in the normative area and positive steps taken to collect additional data on domestic violence and the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator, as well as the improvements in statistics on VAWG (Violence Against Women and Girls), are welcomed.¹⁷⁹ The independent monitoring and evaluation of policies and measures to prevent and combat VAWG, to identify and expand the human and financial resources to prevent and combat VAWG, to provide stable and sustainable funding levels for women's NGOs, to collect disaggregated data, to set up rape crisis and/or sexual violence referral centers, to ensure the safety of children witnesses, to amend the definition of rape and sexual violence, is still needed.¹⁸⁰ Significant efforts have been made to adopt laws and policies in the field of gender equality, yet the progress is very slow and there is a high prevalence of all forms of violence against women, including the occurrence of verbal violence in the National Assembly.¹⁸¹ There is a need for a more comprehensive response to all forms of violence and to end misogynistic and discriminatory statements against women, which are often made by political and religious representatives¹⁸² and further perpetuated by tabloids. There is a need to double the efforts to improve access to support and protection services for women with disabilities and Roma and migrant women and to strengthen the fight against discrimination and prejudice.¹⁸³

In April 2023, the Government of the Republic of Serbia formed the Council for Gender Equality, as an expert advisory body to serve for four years, led by the Ministry of Labour, Employment, and Social Policy. There council is comprised of 19 Council Members, including representatives of various ministries, the Office for European Integration National Employment Service, the Republic Institute of Statistics, academia, and civil society.

The establishment of Femicide Watch in Serbia is in development and is prescribed by the Strategy for Preventing and Combating Gender-based Violence against Women and Domestic Violence for the period 2021-2025. A coalition of over 15 CSOs supporting the establishment of Femicide Watch was formed, and civil society developed a methodology for Femicide Watch, which was followed by an interactive femicide map for Serbia, Montenegro, and Albania.¹⁸⁴ In February, a protest #NotOneMore was organized demanding a state response for the prevention of femicide. In 2023, 29 women were killed in the family and/or intimate-partner relationships context. Killers in these contexts were the victims' former or then-current partners and/or husbands, sons, fathers, or other family members. According to available data, every year in Serbia approximately 30

women are killed, and the available research shows that almost every femicide could have been prevented.¹⁸⁵ In many cases, a lack of timely and effective reaction by the system's institutions to reports of violence has been documented, as has the inadequacy of their attempts to reduce the danger and their failure to consider the risk to the victim's safety. A campaign #WholsNext was launched and "Stop femicide" flags were raised on March 3 on the buildings of the Protector of Citizens, the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, and the Human Rights House and in front of the United Nations headquarters in Belgrade to show the public and decision-makers the determination and commitment of women's organizations to form an independent body to fight femicide.¹⁸⁶

Regarding gender-sensitive language (GSL), 2023 saw a strong backlash from the Serbian Orthodox Church, Matica Srpska, and the Serbian Academy of Arts and Science (SANU), to which the Commissioner for Equality responded immediately.¹⁸⁷ The main opponents to the use of GSL are currently the Serbian Academy of Arts (its Body for Language Standardization) and Science and Matica Srpska, the oldest Serbian literary, cultural, and scientific institution. GSL is seen by them as a serious form of violence against Serbian language and its literary-linguistic norms.¹⁸⁸ The Orthodox Church has expressed that it sees Law on Gender Equality as "forced implementation of the so-called gender ideology and policy".¹⁸⁹ Accordingly, an initiative for the evaluation of the constitutionality of the articles on GSL was submitted.¹⁹⁰

Notable efforts are ongoing to increase awareness of women's rights to inheritance. In partnership with the Women's CSOs, a campaign on women's rights to inheritance and property ownership and a theatre play entitled 'How big is my share (Koliki je moj deo)?' were implemented and reached two million individuals.¹⁹¹ The Cadastre of the Republic of Serbia keeps track of gender-disaggregated data, while cooperation with public notaries has been established through the development of an informative brochure on inheritance rights.

The regional cooperation of women in the police sector has increased. A Declaration was signed at a Regional Conference of Women Police Networks in October 2023 on the mutual cooperation and improvement of the position of women and networks of women in the police from the region, including the nations of Albania, Bosnia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Slovenia, and Bulgaria and the SEPCA South East Europe Police Chiefs Association.¹⁹²

Children

In May 2023, in the span of 24 hours, two mass shootings occurred in the Republic of Serbia, resulting in the loss of 18 lives - of whom 10 were children, 7 young adults aged 18 to 25,

¹⁷⁹ Council of Europe 2023a.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ European Parliament 2023.

¹⁸² Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia 2023.

¹⁸³ Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe 2023.

¹⁸⁴ FemPlatz2023a.

¹⁸⁵ FemPlatz 2023a.

¹⁸⁶ FemPlatz 2023b.

¹⁸⁷ N1 2023b.

¹⁸⁸ Open Doors of Judiciary 2023.

¹⁸⁹ Serbian Orthodox Church 2023.

¹⁹⁰ Novosti 2021.

¹⁹¹ Zuko 2023.

¹⁹² Euronews 2023.

and one adult school security staff. The first horrifying incident took place at the elementary school Vladislav Ribnikar in Belgrade, where 9 children and 1 adult lost their lives from firearms brought to school by a 13-year-old student at the same school. This was an unprecedented incident in Serbia but also in the region, and has left the system, society, and the schools at a loss for how to best provide support to children and young people, as well as parents and teachers. The second incident occurred just one day after the first near a school in the town of Mladenovac, 30 km south of Belgrade, with 8 people killed (including one child) and 14 adolescents and youth injured.

The Government of Serbia introduced and implemented measures that address the consequences of these violent incidents. Intersectoral Working Groups for Youth Mental Health for crisis intervention and security and a Council for the Prevention of Peer Violence were established to achieve better results and to adequately respond to the crisis. The newly established working groups should strengthen prevention efforts to combat violence among and against children and create safe environments for children, as well as address mental health issues in children and youth. Psychoeducational material was developed and distributed to all affected schools in the first days following the tragedy and then shared with all schools across Serbia.¹⁹³ Also, recommendations to the media for reporting about mass shootings were developed and disseminated, as was a clear communication strategy targeting the media, focusing on key messages of support for institutions, affected families, and professionals dealing with tragedies. In this context, the lowering of the minimum age of criminal responsibility below 14 is discouraged, as has been supported by strong advocacy from the civil society and expert community, including the Committee on the Rights of the Child, due to children's developmental stage and their limited understanding of their actions. Correspondingly, through successful advocacy, it has been concluded that lowering this age will not decrease juvenile detention, but rather the focus should be on early support and intervention programs for children.

One of the immediate actions taken by the Government of Serbia was focused on efforts to tackle the excessive number of guns in the possession of citizens, as well as the number of granted licenses for citizens to hold and/or use weapons, both of which serve as cautionary reminders of the established impact of guns and munition possession and the number of criminal offenses committed with firearms that result in lethal consequences. The Ministry of Interior launched a public awareness campaign for voluntary weapon surrender, which began on May 8 and was extended until June 30. As a result of this very successful initiative, promoted through various media channels and outreach methods, including videos, billboards, social media, and flyers, citizens surrendered a significant number of firearms, amounting to 82,398 pieces, along with 4,243,139 pieces of ammunition and 26,485 explosive devices, by June 28, 2023.¹⁹⁴

Draft amendments to the law governing the protection of

¹⁹³ UNICEF 2023d; UNICEF 2023c; Ministry of Health of the Republic of Serbia 2023.

¹⁹⁴ See South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons ([SEESAC](#)).

persons with mental disabilities were prepared to introduce extremely restrictive measures for the involuntary placement of children below the age of criminal responsibility in psychiatric institutions, in regard to cases in which a child is suspected of having committed a severe criminal offence, however, these were not adopted in 2023.

National Minorities

According to the 2022 Census published in 2023, there are 21 national minorities in the Republic of Serbia, with the largest groups being Hungarians, Bosniaks, and Roma.¹⁹⁵ The legal framework for respecting and protecting the rights of minorities in the Republic of Serbia is largely established. Their status is regulated by the relevant ratified international and regional treaties, including the Council of Europe Framework Convention on National Minorities,¹⁹⁶ and the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia,¹⁹⁷ as well as by the Law on the Protection of the Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities,¹⁹⁸ the Law on National Councils of National Minorities,¹⁹⁹ and the Law on the Official Use of Languages and Scripts.²⁰⁰ A new Action Plan for the Realization of the Rights of National Minorities is in its final phase. The Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue increased funding for National Minority Councils by 17% compared to the previous year.²⁰¹ In accordance with the amended Law on Civil Servants,²⁰² preparations were completed to establish a register of public employees, including the voluntary option to declare national affiliation for statistical purposes. Nevertheless, the national statistical office and professional organizations continue to not collect ethnically disaggregated data. Concerns regarding hate speech and discriminatory terminology against members of the Albanian national minority have been reported, as have issues pertaining to the minority's residence status in southern Serbia and the 'passivation' of addresses.²⁰³ An action plan aimed at improving the representation of Albanians in institutions had been prepared but has yet to be adopted.

Roma

The Roma continue to be the most excluded group in Serbia, facing challenges in almost every facet of inclusion, encompassing housing, employment, social protection, education, and healthcare services.²⁰⁴ The most impoverished Roma communities living in substandard settlements lack access to basic infrastructure and essentials such as electricity, safe water, and sanitation, resulting in persistently high levels of poverty.²⁰⁵

¹⁹⁵ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2022b.

¹⁹⁶ Government of the Republic of Serbia 1998.

¹⁹⁷ Government of the Republic of Serbia 2006.

¹⁹⁸ Government of the Republic of Serbia 2018c.

¹⁹⁹ Government of the Republic of Serbia 2018a.

²⁰⁰ Government of the Republic of Serbia 2018b.

²⁰¹ Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue of the Republic of Serbia 2023d.

²⁰² Government of the Republic of Serbia 2022a.

²⁰³ European Commission 2023a.

²⁰⁴ OHCHR 2023b and Ministry of European Integration of the Republic of Serbia 2023.

²⁰⁵ OHCHR 2020.

Social housing provisions are limited for the Roma, and beneficiaries of social housing face an additional financial burden in the form of property taxes, even though the property in question in such cases does not represent their private ownership.²⁰⁶

The revised Roma Inclusion Strategy for the period 2020-2030, accompanied by a corresponding Action Plan, was adopted and covers five priority areas. However, the coordination between national and local authorities, as well as Roma-sensitive budgeting, still requires strengthening. Job descriptions for local Roma coordinators, pedagogical assistants, and health mediators have yet to be standardized and incorporated as an integral part of local self-government services, along with additional financial support.

Only 7% of Roma children up to 5 years of age attend preschool, compared with 61% in the general population. Further efforts are needed to achieve equitable preschool education for the most disadvantaged children by strengthening governance and expanding the scope and quality of infrastructure and services. The EU suggests that in the coming year, Serbia should “increase participation in early childhood education and care, in particular of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.”²⁰⁷

Persons at risk of statelessness

Some 1,900 persons, mainly belonging to the Roma national minority, still face problems with personal documents, including birth registration, and are therefore considered at risk of statelessness.²⁰⁸ Internally displaced Roma represent one of the most vulnerable groups in society and face problems in accessing socio-economic rights due to the practice of the registration of their permanent residence being not harmonized. Persons falling into this group mostly live in deplorable conditions in informal settlements lacking basic infrastructure. The Serbian authorities have intensified efforts to eradicate statelessness, including through cooperation with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and civil society and by working towards the fulfillment of the [#IBELONG](#) campaign goal to eradicate statelessness globally by 2024.

Asylum and integration of refugees

Since the formal establishment of the asylum system in Serbia in 2008, 244 persons have been granted international protection.²⁰⁹ In 2023, 8 persons received asylum and subsidiary protection in Serbia. Further investments for improvements in the asylum system, including increasing the presence of the Asylum Office in the relevant centers, and enhanced integration prospects are needed and will contribute to reduced onward movement from Serbia. Recent legislative changes are positive developments as they foster integration and durable solutions. In July 2023, the Government amended the Law on Foreigners and the Law on the Employment of Foreigners,²¹⁰ thus ensuring access to permanent residence for persons benefitting from

international protection in Serbia. The amendments also will enable asylum-seekers to acquire an automatic right to work after six months, following their application for asylum (instead of the nine months previously applicable). Issuance of universally acceptable refugee IDs and travel documents, which would provide increased freedom of movement, is still pending, and remains a gap in refugee protection in Serbia. The number of Ukrainian refugees under temporary protection in Serbia had reached 943 by mid-November 2023.

Mixed movement of refugees and migrants

In 2023, the high number of arrivals has continued, with 92,566 persons documented by the end of October 2023.²¹¹ The trend of increased mobility of refugees and migrants has continued, but at the same time changes in the characteristics of mixed migration flows have been documented, which are reflected in changes in the direction of movement, nationality structures, and shorter stays in reception centers, implying an increased number of border crossing attempts and a greater presence of persons outside the official centers, which has been particularly true in Serbia in the northern part of the country.²¹² These crossings present an especially worrying trend, especially for families and unaccompanied children staying outside of the official centers, as the protection risks related to various forms of violence and abuse increase exponentially in this setting.

According to gender and age disaggregated data, this population is predominantly characterized by men who travel alone, with women often travelling as family members, with an extremely low percentage of single women. The number of families among the migrant population has been reported as low, though there has been an increasing occurrence of unaccompanied children. Unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) are particularly vulnerable to the risks of family separation, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and exploitation and abuse.

As a result of the delay of funding during 2023, the activity of the Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veterans, and Social Affairs (MoLEVSA) in this context decreased, yet the ministry still managed to maintain the basic provision of social protection services for unaccompanied and separated migrant children (UASC) and other vulnerable beneficiaries. A limited number of specialized staff, transport, and other technical support was available for social protection institutions in targeted locations with the most pressing needs. Therefore, assistance for 3,470 vulnerable beneficiaries (3,399 male and 71 female) was ensured, out of which 1,980 were UASC (1,973 male and 7 female). In total, 1,870 children were appointed a guardian. At the same time, community-based protection services and livelihood programs for UASC and victims of human trafficking (VoT) have been ongoing through partnerships with specialized CSO's. For UASC in particular, the main challenges are related to sustainable access to child protection services, appropriate alternative care solutions in line with applicable standards, and adequate data collection and management practices for

²⁰⁶ Government of the Republic of Serbia 2021.

²⁰⁷ European Commission 2023a.

²⁰⁸ UNHCR 2018.

²⁰⁹ UNHCR 2023.

²¹⁰ Government of the Republic of Serbia 2023f.

²¹¹ [Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia](#).

²¹² IOM 2023.

evidence-based policy adjustments.

In the area of border management, there is a need for further strengthening to facilitate regular migration and to successfully detect and suppress cross-border crime. One of the main challenges in this area is the lack of systematic identification and registration. Comprehensive return management is still missing in Serbia. Non-voluntary returns are sporadic and ad-hoc. In 2023, an initiative to establish an electronic Case Management System for readmission, known as eRCMS, was launched with a comprehensive analysis of the existing workflow, IT strategies, infrastructure, and legal and technical prerequisites necessary for integrating the eRCMS system into the current IT infrastructure.

Homeless people

Official data on people experiencing homelessness in Serbia is not precise as the latest data dates back to the 2011 Population Census.²¹³ Estimates from organizations working in the field and providing assistance and support to this population suggest that the number is high and continuously increasing.²¹⁴ However, an informal network of organizations for combating homelessness has been established, and its formalization is planned for the coming year.²¹⁵ During the 2022 census, an opportunity to determine the number of people experiencing homelessness was once again missed, as primary homeless individuals were only counted through the responsible social institution, not at the places where they typically stay (on the streets, in parks, alternative accommodations, etc.). As a result, they remain virtually invisible in the system.

Aiming to identify key problems and challenges and raise public awareness about the issue of homelessness in the Republic of Serbia, the Ministry created the Working Group on Homelessness, which comprises representatives from relevant ministries, public institutions, international organizations, CSOs, independent institutions, and academia. The Ministry organized four social dialogues and several working group meetings on this topic, with a particular focus on access to personal documents, basic services, collecting relevant data, improving the legal framework, and implementing regulations at all levels.²¹⁶

Youth

The new National Youth Strategy 2023-2030 was adopted in January 2023, while in July 2023 a budgeted Action Plan for the first three years of its implementation was passed. The newly adopted Strategy presents a comprehensive policy document to increase the overall well-being of young people in the Republic of Serbia. The Strategy was adopted after a wide participatory

process with all relevant stakeholders taking part in the consultations. In addition, the Ministry of Tourism and Youth continued the development of the Youth Well-being Index as a tool that will monitor the progress in the implementation of youth policies at the national and local levels. At the EU level, there are other indexes that are monitored, e.g., the Youth Progress Index, according to which Serbia improved its rank the most among countries in Europe from 2011 to 2022 (Rank increased from 47th to 42nd).²¹⁷

LGBTIQ+ people

The Republic of Serbia has made important progress in protecting the human rights of LGBTIQ+ people, but data shows that LGBTIQ+ people are still among the most marginalized groups in the country. The Same-Sex Unions Law remains in draft form without any progress or indication of further action, depriving LGBTIQ+ individuals of their human rights associated with these unions, such as access to insurance, inheritance, bank credits, and the ability to establish and enjoy private and family life. The current level of discrimination and lack of acceptance towards LGBTIQ+ individuals signal a regression in the advancement of rights and freedoms achieved in previous periods.

On a positive note, the Belgrade Pride March, held on September 9th without any major incidents, boasted the highest attendance to date. Belgrade Pride Week²¹⁸ included a large number of events, exhibitions, conferences, and discussions, including the Human Rights Conference focusing on the theme of “Legal protection for transgender, intersex, and gender-diverse individuals.” In addition, the recently established Antidiscrimination Council has announced the development of a new Law on Gender Identity, which has been eagerly anticipated and holds potential for progress in this area. The available data²¹⁹ shows that the percentage of unemployment was significantly higher among LGBTIQ+ people (17.5 percent) than the general population (7.2 percent), particularly among LGBTIQ+ people who have experienced higher levels of workplace discrimination and stigma. Greater efforts are required to more consistently and efficiently implement regulations that specifically prevent hate speech and hate crimes against LGBTIQ+ people.

Persons with disabilities

The Serbian Government has approved an **Action Plan for the period 2023-2024**²²⁰ within the scope of the implementation of the Strategy for the Improvement of the Position of Persons with Disabilities in the Republic of Serbia. The Action Plan is structured around one general and three specific goals, aimed at achieving equal opportunities for persons with disabilities to enjoy civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, with respect for their dignity and autonomy, and ensuring independence, freedom of choice, and effective participation

²¹³ Bobic, Mirjana 2019.

²¹⁴ According to the data provided by the [ADRA](#) organization, there has been a discernible upsurge in the population of individuals experiencing homelessness since February 2022. They report that approximately 20 new homeless people have been seeking assistance from their organization on a monthly basis.

²¹⁵ The informal network for combating homelessness is composed of 9 organizations - ADRA, A11, Caritas, Liceulice, Kuhninja solidarnosti Novi Sad, Klikaktiv, Izlazak, PIN, and CK13.

²¹⁶ Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue of the Republic of Serbia 2023a.

²¹⁷ European Youth Forum 2023a.

²¹⁸ [Belgrade Pride 2024](#).

²¹⁹ World Bank 2023c.

²²⁰ Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Policy of the Republic of Serbia 2023a.

in all areas of social life. The Plan will enable follow-up on achieved results, with high-quality reporting and timely review of objectives and identified measures for better planning in the future.

The 2022 annual report by the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality revealed widespread discrimination based on disability, with most complaints related to public service access. The Protector of Citizens reviewed 115 cases in 2022 and uncovered 150 rights violations related to employment, service accessibility, and discrimination. The majority of public buildings in Serbia are inaccessible, including branches of the Republic Fund for Pension and Disability Insurance, health institutions, and social protection institutions. Accessibility in public transport is an ongoing issue, with discrimination and unequal treatment of people with disabilities at airports and in public spaces. The Law on the Prevention of Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities addresses discrimination in transportation, but there are still issues with specialized van transport and audio announcement devices in Belgrade's public transport systems. **Disability assessment** in Serbia should focus on a person's requirements, not just their impairment. Assessment should be individualized and tailored to address specific activities and barriers to inclusion in the community. Six disability assessment systems are currently used in Serbia: work capacity assessment, body impairment assessment, need for assistance and care by another person, additional education, health and social support, and medical-technical aids assessment. Serbia has a systemic issue in its lack of a universal definition of disability across various sectors. Regarding children in this context, Serbia also lacks both a fundamental definition of what constitutes a child with a disability and one that would be applicable across all sectors and policies relevant to children (with disabilities), which creates significant problems for some children and families in accessing benefits and services. **Women and girls in institutions** are exposed to specific forms of gender-based violence, including forced abortions, sterilization, and sexual abuse.²²¹ There has been a delay in the establishment of a fully operational independent national monitoring mechanism within the Ombudsman Institution in line with the convention on the rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) Article 33 and the Law on the Protector of Citizens.

Older persons

The Strategy for Active and Healthy Aging 2024-2030 was adopted by the Government of the Republic of Serbia in September 2023 and will be effective as of 1st January 2024. The Strategy puts more focus on active and healthy aging, enabling older persons to be respected and involved as a resource in their community, considering the significant change in the age structure in Serbia. The Strategy is also based on changing the awareness of the general population towards older persons and of prejudice related to them. By the end of 2023, the Ministry of Family Welfare and Demography expects to develop and adopt an Action Plan for the implementation of the Strategy.

²²¹ UNPRPD, UNCT Serbia, 2023.



5 RISK ANALYSIS

This multidimensional analysis presents the risks that could impact Serbia's development trajectory and hamper national efforts to achieve the SDGs, reduce inequalities and exclusion, and meet the obligations of international human rights laws. **Table 1** presents an assessment of the risks grounded in the UN-established 12-factor multidimensional risk analysis, augmented with COVID-19 related risks and the heightened geopolitical volatility in the wake of the Russian military intervention in Ukraine.

Monitoring and managing risks are important to both SDG achievement and EU accession, as these require major reforms to be carried out in a consultative, coherent, and forward-looking manner.

TABLE 1 Multidimensional risk analysis

SDG	RISK AREAS	DESCRIPTION	SCOPE	LIKELIHOOD	IMPACT	EARLY WARNING SIGNS
ALL	Political environment	Risks of heightened regional tensions based on unresolved conflict legacies and the deteriorating regional geopolitical situation	Heightened tensions among regional partners	High	High	
			Continuation of inflammatory narratives in the political space	High	High	Public statements in country and region, tolerance towards public depiction glorifying war legacies
			Prolonged EU accession process	High	High	Reported lack of progress under chapters 23 and 24
ALL	Governance and institutional capacity	Risks to institutions that would hinder the full realisation of inclusive, gender-responsive development	Limited capacity for comprehensive risk management	Medium	High	
			Limited commitment to fully embrace accountability and transparency frameworks	Medium	High	Limited impact of public discussions with stakeholders and civil society
			Centralised political system that could impede localisation of development initiatives	High	Medium	
			Limited capacity for inclusive evidence-based policymaking	Medium	High	Adoption of policies in urgent procedures
			Capacity gaps to respond to reform needs and resistance to change	Medium	High	Indicators reporting lack of reformative action in rule of law
10, 16, 17	Justice and rule of law	Risks to the fair, effective and comprehensive implementation of the principles of justice, rule of law and accountability to issues	Political influence on the appointment and independent action of the judicial system	Medium/High	High	Reported risks to independence and effectiveness of the judiciary
			Implementation gap of legislation and policies on human rights issues	Medium/High	High	Threats reported against groups of rights-holders
10, 16, 17	Democratic space / civil society voice and participation	Risks to democratic and human rights institutions, and to civil and political rights resulting from shrinking civic space, exclusion, repression, and intimidation	Limited space for civil society and human rights Defenders unable to exercise mandate	Medium-High	Medium-High	Reported threats to HRDs and low impact of their participation in public processes
			Obstruction of media and civic actors	Medium-High	High	Repeated reported threats towards journalists and reported lack of media pluralism
			Limited inclusion of young people, women and other groups in social and political life	Medium	High	
			Mechanisms of engagement between citizens and the State are not effective leading to disenfranchisement and degradation of public trust	Medium	Medium	

SDG	RISK AREAS	DESCRIPTION	SCOPE	LIKELIHOOD	IMPACT	EARLY WARNING SIGNS
1, 4, 5, 8, 10, 11	Social cohesion, gender equality and non-discrimination	Risks to social unity and equality resulting from direct and indirect discrimination, horizontal inequalities and demographic trends	High entry barriers to the labour market and inequalities in access	High	High	
			Rural-urban divide	High	High	
			Intergenerational gap	Medium	High	
			Insufficient attention to informal sector and care work	Medium	Medium	Position of informal workers during COVID-19 outbreak; reported cases of labour force abuse under foreign investments
			Gender-based violence and discrimination	Medium-High	High	
		Insufficient attention to social capital, education and skills development for vulnerable groups	Medium-High	High		
3, 6, 7, 11, 12, 16, 17	Public health	Risks to the population, economy and LNOB priorities, resulting from actual and emerging health emergencies	Prevention and response to new COVID-19 waves	Medium	High	Prevalence of new variants on total new cases of COVID-19
			Public resistance to vaccinations	High	High	Low percentage of fully vaccinated on total population
			Increase in preventable or treatable health issues	Medium	Medium	Percentage of people living with obesity or overweight, tobacco use
			Limited dual track capacities during emergencies	Medium	Medium	Long waiting lists for elective care
			Air pollution and other pollutants affect public health, including smoking	High	High	PMA concentration in the air of major urban centres
1, 2, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 16	Economic stability and growth	Risks to economic growth and stability, resulting from structural inefficiencies and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian military intervention in Ukraine	Supply chain constraints limit Serbia's export capacity	Medium	Medium	Container shortages Increased prices of international transport Hoarding/panic buying
			Deterioration of international financial markets leading to higher interest rates	Low	Medium	High Government/private debt in major world economies Trends in housing prices and mortgage debt Increasing inflation Consumer-led growth
			Protectionist policies by partners constrain exports-led growth	Low	Low	Trade tensions on international markets leading to retaliatory tariffs
			Limited development of the financial sector makes firms unable to access funds needed for the transformation to a low carbon economy	Medium High	High	Risk aversion of Serbia's banks Insufficient market capitalisation of the stock market
			Limited access to global markets; Open Balkan initiative/ Common Regional Market not fully embraced	Medium	Low	Further delays in the WTO accession Trade facilitation/behind the border barriers not addressed

SDG	RISK AREAS	DESCRIPTION	SCOPE	LIKELIHOOD	IMPACT	EARLY WARNING SIGNS
6, 7, 11, 12, 13, 15	Environment and climate change	Risks to the ecology of the territory, its ecosystem and its people resulting from issues associated with the environment, climate and natural resources	Lack of vision and commitment to implementing structural reforms needed to boost low carbon growth	High	High	Civil society not meaningfully involved in the development of policies and regulations Lacking ambition for reform efforts
			Limited capacities and skills to implement the green agenda	Medium-High	High	
			Insufficient & ineffective coordination of all development efforts	Medium-High	High	
			Unsustainable production/ consumption patterns, including in agriculture and forestry	High	High	Infrastructure projects not completed on time Environmental policies not enforced Environmental incentives not incorporated into COVID-19 stimulus packages
			Increased frequency of extreme weather events and resulting natural hazards (e.g. river floods, droughts, landslides, fires, etc.)	High	High	Infrastructure not resilient to climate change impacts Low percentage of irrigated land
3, 8, 16, 17	Population decline and rapid ageing of the population	Risks from depopulation to environmental and societal sustainability	Outmigration affecting national and local capacities for development	Medium/High	High	Surveys show that a growing percentage of the population has plans to emigrate or an intention to emigrate
			Future influx of migrants/ refugees not integrated effectively in the labour market	Medium	Low	Increasing anti-refugee/migrant sentiments



6 REGIONAL ANALYSIS

Overall, Serbia has continued to be an active participant in Balkan regional cooperation initiatives, within the constraints of: (i) competing geo-political interest since the onset of the war in Ukraine; and (ii) the challenges of state-building given several still-unresolved internal disputes.

Serbia's relations with Croatia have mutually improved in the sphere of trade relations, but historical enmities continue to be exploited politically by both sides. Relations with Albania have steadily strengthened, both politically and economically, but are also sometimes negatively affected by Belgrade-Pristina tension. There is international optimism this year that, following a protracted period of government formation in Podgorica, the new authorities there have prioritized increased cooperation with Belgrade. Relations with Skopje remain strategically close on most matters.

Serbia, along with the other larger economies in the region, is making slow but steady progress in becoming competitive in segments of the European market, with increases in FDI due to favorable geography, a relatively educated and skilled labour force, and substantially lower wage costs than in neighboring EU member states. FDI has been a cornerstone of the country's economic model in recent years, and remained solid in H1 2023, growing by around 20% in real terms year on year, reaching 6.3% of GDP. In the first quarter, 63% of inflows came from EU countries – almost double the share of the year before; at the same time, investment from China amounted to 15% of total inflows – around half its share in 2022. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from the Western Balkans remains a small fraction of total FDI in Serbia.²²²

Serbia participates in most major regional inter-governmental cooperation initiatives, also including the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), the Transport Community Treaty, and the Energy Community Treaty, among others. It also participates in EU-promoted initiatives within the "Berlin Process" and is a continuous promoter of the Open Balkans initiative. All are aimed at the goal of a Common Regional Market, which has recently received renewed emphasis, and resource commitments, by the Council of the European Union. Serbia cooperates extensively with Eurojust, Interpol, and Europol. Additionally, Serbia has been active in the European Political Community, a new organization which includes both EU member states and non-EU countries in various stages of EU accession, or with aspirations of joining the EU, and which aims at enhancing cooperation and fostering a more cohesive approach to common challenges.

Serbia, as part of the Western Balkans, is involved in the European Police Committee which, through biannual summits, offers an opportunity for leaders to discuss and coordinate on key issues, ranging from peace and security to economic and environmental challenges.

The economic and political consequences of war in Ukraine have exposed the region to rapidly evolving economic and political pressures, and, despite some examples of coordination, most of the responses remain ad hoc. Regional cooperation on

gender equality and women's empowerment continues to make headway via active initiatives promoting gender-responsive governance in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Serbia, as well as those combatting gender-based violence. Efforts recognizing women's potential for transformation at leadership level are UN priorities for the region.

²²² Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies 2023.



7 CONCLUSIONS AND LOOKING AHEAD

In 2023, the strides forward have juxtaposed with setbacks. Challenges are shaped not just by internal dynamics, but also shifting regional dynamics and a complex geopolitical global landscape and necessitate comprehensive approaches that are embedded in multilateral agendas

Looking forward into 2024, Serbia's focus should remain on accelerating the pace of reforms in key areas defined by the EU acquis and the wider Agenda 2030, implementing the commitments of the green transition, consolidating the transformation of the education sector, and ensuring that both the digitalisation efforts and the fight against climate change and environmental degradation do not augment inequalities. Instead, the principles and guidance articulated in previous years in the just transition strategy and through the leave no one behind tool should be brought to the forefront of state and local actions. Equally important will be to strengthen the education sector and sustain educational performances that were documented in the 2022 census.

As the country embarks in the planning and preparations for Expo27 in Belgrade, with an estimated investment of Euro12billion, the focus on infrastructure development will expand, and should be guided by principles of efficiency, resilience and good governance. This will be an opportunity for Belgrade to join lead cities in Europe in their aspirations towards a low carbon intensive model, greater sustainability and more wellbeing for its people.

Serbia's re-commitment the six pivotal SDG transitions will be the backbone of UN's efforts in 2024 and beyond. The priority of the UN in Serbia remains supporting inclusive growth. We will continue to advocate for policies that not only drive economic prosperity but also ensure equitable distribution of benefits, safeguarding the rights and well-being of all and leaving no one behind. This approach is vital in addressing the deep-rooted issues of inequality and social exclusion, particularly of the Roma community, and increasingly of elderly people. The fundamental topic of violence within the society, affecting children and women, needs to be addressed through the full implementation of the laws. This means more efficient judiciary response, as well as more comprehensive prevention strategies and a greater attention to mental health, educational environment, hate speech, and curbing the influence of media in promoting violence.

Environmental sustainability is a critical area for Serbia's future: air pollution still claims far too many lives, and a just energy transition plan, which prioritizes the concerns of mining communities and energy-poor citizens, is an urgent priority. The renewed emphasis on preserving biodiversity and the sustainable use of natural resources – also underpinned by Serbia's commitments as Chair of the Carpathian Convention - must now take centre stage. Our analysis underscores the need for transparent, accountable, and participative governance systems in fostering trust among citizens and creating a conducive environment for sustainable development. Serbia has made critical advances in the digitalization of government services, and we will be supporting authorities in making these services user centric to ensure universal accessibility as a prerequisite for the involvement of all citizens across all areas of public life. Finally, we are encouraged by the increased understanding of the interdependence of all SDGs. For example, by signing both the Budapest

Declaration and the UAE Declaration on Climate and Health, Serbia has shown that it is ready to mobilize its resources for a development that is grounded in human well-being. The UN's expertise, resources, and global perspective remain crucial to support Serbia in transitioning towards a new growth paradigm, with a focus on collaborative efforts, knowledge sharing, and capacity building and in broad cooperation with all development partners.

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ACRONYMS

AFD	Agence Française de Développement (French Development Agency)	IDs	Identification Documents
AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome	IMF	International Monetary Fund
ALMPs	Active Labour Market Policies	IMWG	Inter-Ministerial Working Group
BIE	Bureau International des Expositions (International Bureau of Exhibitions)	IPHS	Institute of Public Health Serbia
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy	IT	Information Technology
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity	ITU	International Telecommunication Union
CCA	Common Country Analysis	LGBTIQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer
CEFTA	Central European Free Trade Agreement	LNOB:	Leave No One Behind
CO2	Carbon Dioxide	LSGs	Local Self-Governments
COP	Conference of the Parties	MEI	Ministry of European Integration
COP15	UN Biodiversity Conference in Montreal, Canada, 7-19 December 2022	MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys
COP28	UN Climate Change Conference in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, 30 November - 12 December 2023	MMR	Measles Mumps and Rubella
COP7	Seventh Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians	MoLEVSA	Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran, and Social Affairs
COVID	Coronavirus Disease	MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	MW	Megawatt
CSO	Civil Society Organization	NbS	Nature-Based Solutions
CSW	Centers for Social Work	NCDs	Noncommunicable Diseases
CVDs	Cardiovascular Diseases	NECP	National Energy and Climate Plan
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction	NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
EPS	Enterprises SOEs Elektroprivreda Srbije	NHRI	National Human Rights Institution
eRCMS	electronic Case Management System	NMRF	National Mechanisms for Reporting and Follow up to UN Human Rights Mechanisms
ESD	Education for Sustainable Development	NRTD	National Recommendations Tracking Database
EU	European Union	ODIHR	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
EU-27	The 27 member countries of the EU	OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
EUR	Euro (Currency)	OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
Expo	Large international exhibition	PA	Protected Areas
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization	PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment	PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
GDP	Gross Domestic Product	PM	Particulate Matter
GHG	Greenhouse Gases	RC	Resident Coordinator
GNI	Gross National Income	REM	Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media
GSL	Gender-Sensitive Language	RSD	Serbian Dinar
HepB3	Hepatitis B	SAA	Stabilisation and Association Agreement
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus	SALW	Small Arms and Light Weapons
HJC	High Judicial Council	SANU	Srpska, and the Serbian Academy of Arts and Science
HPC	High Prosecutorial Council	SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
HPV	Human Papillomavirus	SDSN	Sustainable Development Solutions Network
HR75	Human Rights 75 Initiative	SEPCA	Southeast Europe Police Chiefs Association
HRDs	Human Rights Defenders	SEESAC	South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons
HRMs	Human Rights Mechanisms	SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
ICCS	International Civic and Citizenship Education Study	SLAPP	Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation
ICILS	International Computer and Information Literacy Study	SMEs	Small and Medium Enterprises
ICT	Information and Communication Technology	SOEs	State-Owned Enterprises
		SORS	Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia
		STI	Science, Technology, and Innovation
		TALIS	Teaching and Learning International Survey

TB	Tuberculosis
THB	Trafficking in Human Beings
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UASC	Unaccompanied and Separated Children
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UHC	Universal Health Coverage
UN	United Nations
UNCT	United Nations Country Team
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNECE	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
UNSDCF	United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework
UNTOC	United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
USD	United States Dollar (Currency)
VAWG	Violence Against Women and Girls
VLR	Voluntary Local Review
VoT	Livelihood Programs for UASC and Victims of Human Trafficking
WHO	World Health Organization
WOAH	World Organisation for Animal Health
WTO	World Trade Organization
WUF12	World Urban Forum 12



UNITED NATIONS
SERBIA



UN Country Team in Serbia

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